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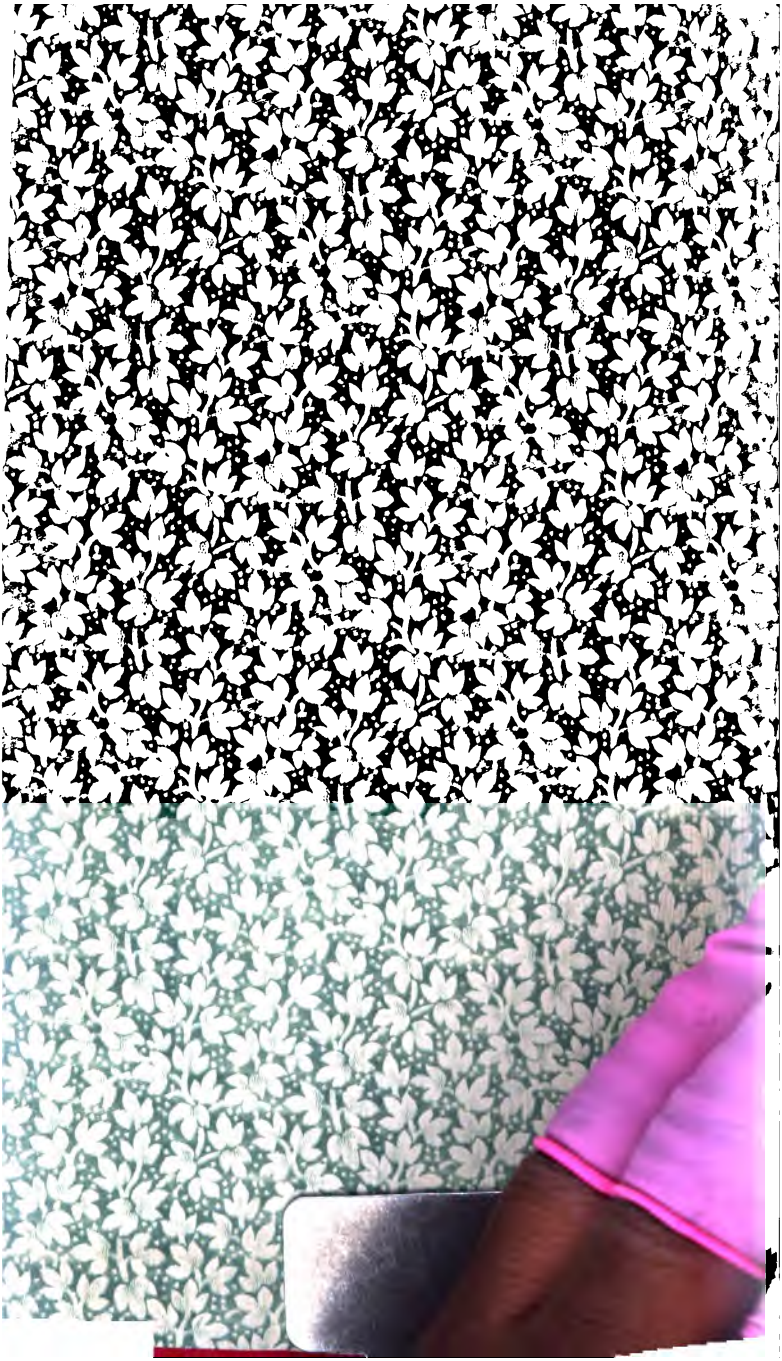
PEERESS AND PLAYER

BY
FLORENCE
MARRYAT.



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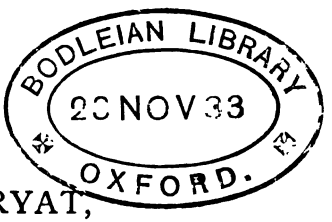

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT,

AUTHOR OF 'LOVE'S CONFLICT,' 'MY SISTER THE ACTRESS,' ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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PEERESS AND PLAYER.

CHAPTER I.

THE LADIES IN THE WOOD.

SUSIE is sitting in the drawing-room that evening, awaiting the return of her husband and his friends from their sport. She has taken great pains to obliterate the traces of emotion from her face, and to attire herself as becomingly as possible, in order to please Lord Luton's eye. She has taken a dislike to her white dresses

lately, poor child! although her husband often requests her to assume them; but the robe which she wears this evening, of old gold cashmere, just a couple of tints lighter than her chesnut hair, suits her admirably, and makes her look still younger and fairer than she is. Her hair is lying loosely about her forehead, and twisted in a knot at the back of her head; her hazel eyes are bright and star-like; and a feverish flush upon her cheeks, caused by her tears, lends an additional charm to her appearance. She has adorned herself for Philip, and now sits expectant of his return, hoping to be rewarded by a look of admiring approbation.

How often is it the case that women, after having taken the utmost trouble with every detail of their personal appearance, in order to catch the eye of the man they love, are either passed over altogether for the more engrossing charms of sport or business, or else informed frankly that they look much better in their everyday garb? Nevertheless, they go on dressing

for them, and will continue to do so till the crack of doom.

Susie, however, has had a double motive to-day in making herself as fair as she can in the eyes of Lord Luton. She wants not only to win him *to* her, but *from* himself, and she is ready with that motive to receive him at least an hour before the time. At last he comes. She hears the tramp of his visitors' footsteps on the frosty pathway, and the ring of Philip's voice as he dilates upon some question of sport. As they near the house, however, he appears to stop speaking, and as they enter the hall, instead of looking at once into the drawing-room to give her a word of welcome, as is his wont, she hears him fling open the baize door that leads to the servants' quarters, and call impatiently,—

'Where is Mrs Gennett?'

There is a slight delay, and then the old housekeeper shuffles slowly up the stone passage, and confronts her master.

'Did your lordship wish to speak to me?'

'Of course I do! Why is the window of the octagon boudoir left open?'

Susie, hearing the question, starts, and turns sick at heart again. Mrs Gennett, in her engrossing chatter, must have forgotten to close the shutter of Magdalena's room. That is nothing. But what hurts her most is to think that Philip cannot return to Lutonstowe without letting his eyes wander up to the window of that unforgotten room. Did he sigh as he did so? Did he lament that it was no longer his lot to run up to the boudoir first, and clasp the faithless Magdalena in his arms? Susie strains her ears to hear what he shall say next. Mrs Gennett mumbles something about her having entered the boudoir to dust and clean it. And then Lord Luton's voice rings out again,—

'But it is gross carelessness on your part to neglect to close the window on such a day as this. Go up and see to it at once; everything in the room will be spoilt.'

So he cares for those baubles still, and

would have them preserved for ever. He wishes to keep the chairs and sofas she sat on safe from moth and rust, the mirror she gazed in undimmed, the gifts he gave her in the same order in which she left them—in the same order, perhaps, in which he hopes some day to be able to restore them to her hands. Susie bites her lips furiously to prevent the tears overflowing her eyes. She has never heard Lord Luton express interest in any room in the house before.

It is evident where all his hopes and desires are centred. Perhaps he enters that boudoir when unobserved, and loses himself in dreams of what has been! The present Lady Luton feels as if she could kill herself and him when she thinks of it. The rebellious colour flares into her cheeks, and the mutinous tears rise to her eyes, but she orders them both back sternly, and only looks a little paler than usual when Lord Luton and his friends, having made their toilets, enter the drawing-room prepared for dinner.

'Well, my darling!' says Philip affectionately, as he kisses his wife before them all, 'and how have you been amusing yourself to-day? Have you been out for a walk?'

'No,' she answers, coldly; 'I have been nowhere. I have sat at home all the afternoon.'

'That won't do, child; I shall have to send for Mrs George if you begin to mope. You should have taken a drive if you didn't care to walk; you have but to name your own time for the carriage.'

'I did not wish to drive either,' says Susie.

'Let us go in to dinner then,' replies Luton carelessly, 'and see if the pleasures of the table will wake us up.'

Lord Luton's guests only consist of a couple of cousins, with whom Susie has not had time to become familiar, so that the conversation is chiefly monopolised by the gentlemen, and she grows more and more miserable as the hours go on, and when she retires to bed at night she

cannot sleep. This is a most unusual thing with her, for being young and full of health her eyes are generally closed as soon as her head is on the pillow. But to-night she cannot drive the thought of her rival from her mind, and she tortures herself by imagining that all her husband's expressions of affection are but pity for her youth and silliness and incapacity to fill the place of the wife he has lost.

'Naturally he pities me,' she thinks, with a sort of dull despair knocking at her heart. 'I pleased his eye at first, but he finds I am incapable of proving a friend to him (as perhaps *she* did), and he is sorry for me and for himself. Dear Philip! He has such a good heart; anyone could tell that from the kindness with which he protected me the first time we met. But he should have let things stop there; I am not fit to be his wife. I told him so myself, and he must feel as I do when I have pulled up a wayside flower that I can make no use of. I have

destroyed its life without making my own the richer. But if he knew how *I love him* — how I would sacrifice myself in every way if it would make him the happier, he would see, perhaps, that though I may not be so beautiful, or clever, or well-bred as *she* was, I am more worthy to be loved in return. *I* would not deceive him — God knows I would not. I would die sooner than dishonour a hair of his dear head! But what is the use of my arguing like this? Love cannot come at will. I know that well enough, and neither can forgetfulness. Philip cannot help remembering his first wife—perhaps he cannot help loving and regreting her still. But oh! how much I wish he had found it out beforehand, and not been so foolish as to fancy I could ever fill up the gap her loss has made for him. He said I should heal his grief and comfort him, but instead of that, I feel that my presence only brings *hers* more forcibly before him, and he will never, *never* forget; and I cannot bear it. I would rather be

thousands of miles away from him, than live in the same house and know that each time he looks at me he remembers that he once had another wife who deceived him as I may deceive him too. Oh, I am very miserable! I never thought I could be so miserable as this.'

So the poor child (who has never had any responsibility laid upon her shoulders before) thinks and mourns with her sweet eyes wide open, staring into the darkness As a rule she is fast asleep long before Lord Luton (who has contracted a bad habit of sitting up late) occupies his share of the matrimonial four-poster, but to-night he is tired himself, and Susie hears him enter his dressing-room long before the usual time. She closes her eyes and professes to be wrapt in slumber as he comes softly into her chamber, and shading the light of the wax candle with his hand. She cannot help noticing, even then, how careful he is to make no noise to disturb her, and how quietly he lays himself down in his accustomed place. Once he whispers

'*Susie*,' as though to test if she were really asleep, but she makes no answer to his appeal, and so he speaks no more. He is longing at that moment to take her in his arms and kiss her, if the silly girl but knew it, but she has shut her heart against him, and she makes no sign of having heard.

So Philip throws his handsome head upon his pillow, and is soon wrapt in a profound slumber. He seems uneasy, however, and throws himself about restlessly, which still further increases Susie's wakefulness. At last, fully disturbed by him, and feeling a little wearied perhaps by her own want of sleep, she raises herself on her elbow, and looks at her husband. How lovable he appears as he lies there, his hair tossed off his noble forehead, and his fine face flushed with the warmth of slumber. Susie perceives that he is dreaming also, for every now and then an indistinct word bursts from his lips, and dies upon the air half uttered.

At length his brows contract as if in pain or anger—his hands clench themselves

outside the coverlet, and then relax again, whilst he heaves a little sigh. '*Magdalena!*' he says, appealingly, '*Magdalena!*' As his young wife hears the name, distinctly given, her brows contract like his own, and she turns away so suddenly that Lord Luton wakes and asks if anything is the matter. But Susie will not speak. This seems to her to be the climax of everything. She has never watched her husband in sleep before. How often may he not have murmured the same hateful name into her very ears, whilst she lay beside him, unconscious of the treachery she suffered from. Even whilst he sleeps, cannot he forget that woman? Even whilst his lawful wife is by his side, must his thoughts go back to *her* who is no longer his—of whom it is as great a sin to think as though she had never belonged to him?

Poor Susie lies awake for the remainder of the night, and is such a picture of pallid woe in the morning, that Lord Luton is alarmed by the idea that she must be ill.

He urges her not to sit indoors all day by the fire. It is too close and enervating for her. She has been used to a freer life. She must go out into the country, and get fresh air.

'Yes, yes,' cries Susie, thankful for anything that shall take her away from him, 'I have nothing else to do. I will go at once; and perhaps I shall look better by luncheon time.

She catches up her hat, and wanders away into the woods that encircle Lutonstowe. It is a lovely spring morning—balmy enough to tempt anyone out into the pale, pure sunshine. The woods are still bare overhead, but can boast of a carpet of moss and early ferns, from the fronds of which peep glorious clusters of primroses, and delicate cyclamen, and beautiful blue hyacinths. The birds are singing in the leafless trees, for it is their time of love making, and naked branches have no power to chill their ardour. Their home nests will be warm and snug enough in the forked boughs. What care they if the out-

side world looks rather bleak and bare. But Susie wanders on absorbed in her own thoughts, and almost unconscious of the natural beauties that surround her. What are spring or summer to us—what verdant fields, or laughing waters, when our hearts are breaking? Better far to encounter winter's blast, or barren rocks, with a mind at ease regarding those we love. Home and happiness consist in people, and not places. The mistake is ever to suppose that change of scene and company can ease one pang brought to us by the death or estrangement of our heart's desire.

Susie experiences this fully as she traverses the woods of Lutonstowe, trampling the spring flowers beneath her feet without observing that she does so. Her mind is possessed with one idea—that she has thrown away her life at its very commencement—sacrificed herself, in fact, to the belief that so insignificant a creature as she is could fill the void caused by sorrow and disappointment in Lord Luton's heart.

He said so, it is true, but she had

been too quick to believe him, and her conscience whispers her that had she not been dazzled by the position he offered, she might have taken more time to consider if she loved him sufficiently to undertake so difficult a task. For, with regard to marriage, Susie has been reared in a very common, but very delusive school, which teaches us that when the first warmth of married life has subsided, the feeling will merge into a calm and tender friendship that will endure until the close of life. This is the teaching of all moral tales written for young people, and of all such good old women as Miss Prescott, who have never had any experience of either love or marriage, and are consequently incompetent to speak upon the matter. For the axiom is utterly wrong. A marriage that is entered into (like most marriages) for the lust of the eye, *i.e.*, for the sake of the fancy engendered by beauty, charm of manner or talent, will never be submerged in friendship. The lower feeling cannot be submerged in the higher; it

must rise to it, and in love it never does. Friendship should come first. It should attract first. It should be the foundation of the edifice. Then, if on a friendship composed of sympathy of feeling and esteem of character, you can kindle the fire of love you have indeed a house, not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. Lord Luton does love his wife—far more than Susie imagines — but their mutual fancy for each other, his admiration for her simple virtues, and her admiration for his supposed heroism and superiority to herself, had lived too brief a time to culminate in marriage.

The fire had but just been lighted, the flames were flickering yet, and the first adverse wind would put them out. They should have waited until the light of their beacon love had reached to heaven, and shown them there was nothing else in the wide world better worth loving than each other. But they have only done what thousands of their fellow-creatures do, and the result is this—that Susie already

doubts, where she should have trusted with the faith we give to God. At last her sad thoughts seem to communicate their weakness to her limbs, and feeling she can go no further, she sinks down at the foot of a giant oak, and begins to cry. Here, at least, she thinks she can indulge her tears without a witness. Poor little Susie, she is but a baby yet in some things, and she is bitterly disappointed. And so she cries without restraint, though not quite so privately as she imagines. For in a few minutes she hears a very soft and kind voice asking her the reason of her grief, and starting to her feet, finds herself confronted by two ladies, who are standing by the tree. One is a very old woman, with silvery white hair, and a wrinkled face; the other, on whose arm she leans, is younger, though near middle age, and looks as gentle as her friend. Susie cannot feel afraid of them. On the contrary, she is drawn towards them instantly, and wishes she could tell them of her trouble. The ladies look startled as she lifts her

lovely face to theirs. They have seldom seen anyone so perfectly pretty and innocent looking before.

'Dear child,' says the older lady, in a sympathetic tone, 'what is the matter with you? Have you lost anything, or done anything wrong? Your sobs went to my heart.'

'You are very kind, madam,' replies Susie, catching her breath; 'and it is very foolish of me to break down like this in a public place; but I am rather unhappy—that is all.'

'And that is more than enough at your tender age,' says her new friend kindly; 'an age when life should be at its best and brightest for you. Why, you cannot be more than sixteen.'

'Oh, yes! I am,' rejoins Susie eagerly; I was eighteen last birthday.'

'Were you, indeed? Still that is not *very* old, you know; at least it does not appear so to me who completed my seventy-fifth year at Christmas. And yet you are in trouble! Is it nothing in which we can help you?'

'Oh, no, madam, indeed,' says Susie, blushing crimson. 'You see,' she continues, glancing down at her dress, which is richly trimmed with fur, 'I have everything I could desire, and this pain,' pressing her hand upon her poor little heart, 'is something in which no one can share.'

'Except God,' replies the old lady gravely; and then noticing the ungloved hand which Susie has raised to her breast, she says,—'Is it possible that you are a married woman at your age?'

'Yes! I am married. I have been married eight months,' replies Susie, as the tears well up again into her swollen eyes.

The strangers thought they had been dealing with an unprotected girl. Now they feel they have no longer any right to interfere with the cause of her sorrow.

'You are very young to have taken such a responsibility upon yourself, my dear,' says the old lady, 'for marriage is a heavy responsibility, and often full of trouble, but everything will come right in the end, if we only go straight on, and do

our duty. I have no right even to wish to know the reason of your tears, but I may hope that they have no serious cause to flow.'

'I think it *is* a serious cause, and I have no objection to telling it to you, though I daresay you will call me very silly,' says Susie, hoping in her heart of hearts that she *will* say so; 'but the fact is, my husband has been married before, and I fancy he thinks a great deal more of his first wife than he does of me.'

The ladies smile. It seems absurd that any man could fail to appreciate such a beautiful specimen of young womanhood as stands before them.

'Oh! my dear, that is indeed silly!' exclaims the former speaker. 'Many wives have doubtless thought the same before you, but it is a great error. For the love and remembrance that a man holds for the dead are so different from those he offers to the living, that they cannot be compared. Besides which, it is a sacred duty to remember those who have gone before

us. Your husband would not be a good man if he did not do so.'

'But she is *not* dead!' cries Susie, in her anxiety to defend her own conduct. The instant she has said the words, she recognises her imprudence, and would recall them, but it is too late. The ladies look surprised and incredulous.

'*Not dead?*' they inquire, simultaneously.

Then Susie feels she must go on.

'No! I wouldn't mind so much if she was dead—but she left him—(you understand)—and he divorced her. But he is always thinking of her, though he never says anything, and it makes me wretched.'

'Perhaps he thinks of her to mourn over her sin,' suggests the old lady. 'There may be no lack of love to you in that, my dear.'

'Oh, no, no! he loves her still. I am sure he does,' says Susie, breaking down again, 'for he treasures everything that belonged to her, and he calls on her name, even when he is asleep. But why should

I tell you all this,' the girl continues, wildly; 'what would Philip say if he knew I had spoken of him in this way to a stranger? Oh, pray, pray forget it all. I think I must have been out of my mind to say so much.'

The ladies regard each other significantly. Then the elder one speaks again, in a low, sweet voice.

'My dear young lady, do not regret having placed your confidence in me. I assure you I shall respect it, and all the more that I think I can guess who you are, and can say that I am your husband's friend.'

'Do you know my Philip?' cries Susie, with sparkling eyes.

'I know Lord Luton, if he is (as I guess) your Philip; but I did not know that he had won so innocent and unsophisticated a little wife for himself. I did not even know that he had returned to Lutonstowe.'

'We have only been there a short time, replies Susie, with a deep sigh, 'and I wish now that we had never come. But you will not tell him, will you—that I

was so foolish as to speak to you about this?'

'I will tell him nothing, my dear, that could give you any pain; and indeed I am not likely,' says the old lady, with a sigh as deep as Susie's, 'to be able to tell him anything at all, for I have not met Lord Luton for some years. But take heart, Lady Luton. The memory of that bad woman can never be allowed to embitter your life. Philip—I mean Lord Luton—however careless he may be—could never prove as unworthy of you as that. She was essentially a bad woman, who made him unhappy in every possible way; and if he remembers her, it can only be with scorn and loathing. And now you must do me a favour in your turn. Do not mention our meeting to your husband. And may God bless you, my dear, and make your way straight and plain before you! Good-bye.'

The ladies turn to leave as she speaks, but Susie detains them.

'Shall I not see you again, madam?

You have spoken so kindly to me. I should so much like to see you again.'

'Poor child! Are you beginning already to be dependent for sympathy on strangers? I cannot tell you if we shall meet again. My daughter sometimes brings me on fine days to this wood. If it should happen you are here also, we may see each other. But I cannot go to Lutonstowe. Lord Luton has gathered friends around him of late years, such as I can neither countenance nor associate with, and it has broken up our intimacy. But chance may yet bring you and me together again.'

'I am so sorry,' rejoins Susie wistfully; 'for oh! madam, what a friend you might have been to me, who have no mother!'

'*No mother!*' echoes the old lady; 'and is it long since you have lost her?'

'I have lost her all my life, madam. She died when I was born; and though Philip has a mother, she does not care for him, and so she will never care for me.'

'Did Lord Luton tell you this, Lady Luton?'

'No. He has never mentioned his mother's name to me—indeed, I should not have known she lived, excepting for the information of a friend.'

'Then your friend has told you wrong, my dear. Lord Luton's mother loves him dearly, and has always done so, and it is his own conduct alone that has estranged her from him.'

'Do you know her, then, madam?' demands Susie.

'I know her well.'

'Oh! how I wish I knew her too!' cries the girl, clasping her hands; 'for if she were kind, as you are, I could tell her of my trouble, and perhaps she would set matters right between Philip and me. He could not be angry at anything his *mother* said to him. But she is a grand lady, and perhaps she would refuse to know me.'

'Why so, my dear? Are not you a lady too?'

'Yes; I know Lord Luton has made me so, but I was not his equal, madam, when he married me. I was an actress, and my father manages a theatrical company, and Mrs Lambert told me that the Dowager Lady Luton would never speak to anyone who came off the stage.'

'Mrs Lambert had better confine herself to speaking of matters that come within the range of her experience,' replies the old lady, rather sharply. 'She has never been acquainted with the Dowager Lady Luton, and she never will be. And as for your not being your husband's equal, my dear, I think you *are* in every particular, and I'm as good a judge as anybody. And now I must bid you good-morning, for I am tired with standing so long. But I daresay we shall meet again. And meanwhile, don't be too intimate with Mrs Lambert, for Lord Luton's mother will never go to Lutonstowe whilst *she* is received there, you may take my word for that.'

So saying, the mysterious old lady

saunters slowly away, leaning on her daughter's arm, whilst Susie turns in the opposite direction, and proceeds home.

As soon as the strangers are out of earshot, the younger says to the elder,—

'Well, mother! are you not surprised? If this is Philip's wife, how wonderfully we have been deceived! Did not Lady Mountwarren tell you he had married an actress of thirty, who murdered English, and painted to the eyes?'

'She did, Margaret, but allowing for a little fashionable exaggeration, her account was nothing out of the way. But if I am surprised, my dear, I am still more delighted. I never met a more winning young creature in my life. She appears to be simplicity itself, and if she cannot charm my poor Philip back to a better life, I shall think he is lost indeed.'

'Don't say that, mother! The very fact of his marrying such an innocent child is proof in itself that he must still love purity

for its own sake. But he must not make her miserable. She looks all heart, and as if a careless or indifferent word would spoil her happiness.'

'Ah! my dear! what can you expect from a man who has led the life of our poor Philip for the last few years? I suppose he treats this young creature in much the same manner as he does that odious woman, Mrs Lambert, whom I rank in the same category as his depraved and heartless wife.'

'Surely Lady Luton must be mistaken in thinking that Philip still cares for one who was so lost to all feeling for him or her good name.'

'I don't know what to think of it, Margaret. He is evidently making the poor child unhappy. A girl who has been raised from her position to rank and luxury, doesn't cry as if her heart were breaking, for nothing.'

'Mother!'

'Well! my dear!'

'You will make it up with poor Philip

now for *her* sake, won't you? You could do so much to prevent misunderstanding between them.'

'If my son chooses to ask my pardon for what is past, I am ready to forgive him, Margaret. You know that as well as I do. But conduct like his cannot be passed over in silence.'

'He was so miserable at Magdalena's treachery, mother; I think he was half mad. And he is very proud, you know—as proud as yourself. Couldn't you meet him halfway?'

'You mean, could not I call at Lutonstowe, and be encountered perhaps by some creature like Mrs Lambert? No! my dear, I could not.'

'But you might write and ask him to bring his wife to see us, mother! I am sure it would please him. Philip always loved us very dearly. He can hardly be happy whilst we are strangers. And he is your eldest son, dear mother, and you used to be so proud of him. Think of that.'

'Well, my dear! I *will* think of it, but you must give me time,' says the Dowager Lady Luton, as her lip trembles, and an unusual moisture dims her eyes at the remembrance of her first-born son.

CHAPTER II.

THE THIRD VISIT.

MEANWHILE, the good advice given to her by the ladies in the wood does not influence Susie very long. At first, she is inclined to think that she has been foolish and apt to exaggerate her grievances, but a return to Lutonstowe, and the presence of her husband, brings back all her fears with redoubled force. There is another drawback to Susie's happiness at this moment. She misses the excitement and change to which she has been accustomed. So long as she was Lord Luton's companion upon the Continent, seeing new sights and ex-

periencing new pleasures every day, this want had, naturally, no room for making itself felt. And her life in London too, although it commenced at the dullest time of the year, possessed a charm for her in its novelty.

But she finds her existence at Lutonstowe a very different thing. There are many days in the spring when she cannot leave the house, and many more when she does not care to leave it, to drive or walk alone in the leafless country lanes. She knows no one in the neighbourhood, and Lord Luton is absent all day long. The weather makes no difference to the gentlemen, as they go cub-hunting, or rabbit-shooting, returning home as the sun sets, too tired to do more than eat their dinner and go to bed.

Lady Luton has literally no company but that of the garrulous Miss Gennett or her mother, neither of whom ever enter her presence but to leave a sting behind them.

Lord Luton thinks Susie is gaining

health and strength with the country air, instead of which she is growing thinner and paler every day, and longing sometimes—oh, so ardently!—that she could throw off her title and her riches and everything that he has endowed her with, and go back to her father's protection, and earn her modest living on the stage. She is always thinking of it. When the gloaming sets in, and it becomes too dark to see to work or read, Susie sits before the fire with dreamy eyes and folded hands, wondering to herself what the company are doing at that moment, and in what pieces they are going to perform. She pictures her old chum, Louie Montressor, taking her hurried cup of tea before she goes to the theatre to dress. And in imagination she follows her to the dressing-room; hears the lively talk and salutations that pass on all sides; listens for the ringing up of the curtain and the first notes of the orchestra; and ends, perhaps, by bursting into tears as she remembers that she has done with the pleasant excitement

and companionship of the stage for ever. Oh, she was happier far (so Susie tells herself) when she had her honest work to do, and looked forward to nothing more than to her father's rough commendation of her efforts to do it well. Often she thinks she will go back to the stage. She was born to it, she says, and she is not, and never will be, fit for anything else. The grandeur and formality by which she is surrounded oppress and subdue her. She never laughs now, as she and Louie used to laugh together as they made their bargains with the butchers and bakers, and carried home their purchases with their own hands. Philip used to send her bouquets then. He never does so now. He never even picks a flower for her with his own hands. And all the curiosity, the sweet anticipation, the flattered vanity and pleased ambition of her life seems over. She is nothing now—nothing but 'Lady Luton,' and people treat her as if she were quite grown up, and could never care about a bit of fun again. Even

Lord Luton's cousins address her by her married name, and bow formally as they shake her by the hand at meeting. No one seems to remember that she is still a girl, with all a girl's keen appreciation of amusement. Her husband calls her '*child*,' it is true, but only in a pitying and somewhat patronising way, as if he thought her incapable of being anything more. And in Susie's breast there is a very powerful touch of ambition, inherited from both parents—the ambition of the artist to do something worthy of his name before he dies. During solitude this feeling stirs in her strongly.

Men are not quick to observe any change in the appearance of those with whom they live every day; but at last Susie's increasing thinness and pallor become too noticeable to be overlooked, and Lord Luton awakes to the knowledge that his wife cannot be well, or that the air of Lutonstowe does not agree with her. And the notion really alarms him. He has been leaving her very much to herself of

late, because he imagines that no one can lack amusement in the country, and he has been particularly busy over the acres of his friends as well as his own ; but now that the fact of Susie's illness is brought home to him, he is much more frightened than the occasion demands. It is one of his cousins who draws his attention to the fact, and as soon as he has realised it, he throws his gun to the keeper, and declaring he can shoot no more that day, strides homeward over the ploughed fields to Lutonstowe.

He finds Susie, just at the wane of an April afternoon, sitting listlessly on the hearthrug, with her hands clasped upon her knee.

'Why, how is this, my darling?' exclaims Lord Luton, as he enters the drawing-room in his muddy boots and gaiters, and takes a seat beside her. 'They tell me you are ill. Do you feel any pain or weakness, Susie ? Is there anything really the matter with you ?'

'*They* tell you!' she answers, turning

languidly towards him. 'Who are *they?*'

'I should have said my cousin Astley. He remarked just now how much thinner and paler you are than when he came here. And I can see it now for myself. It frightens me terribly. Would you like me to call in a doctor? There is a dear old man in the village here who has attended our family for years.'

'Oh, no! I want no doctor,' cries Susie fretfully. 'I can't be so very bad, if even *you* didn't see it till your cousin Astley called your attention to the fact.'

'But I am a selfish brute, dear, and have been wrapt up in thoughts of my own, else I should have seen it for myself. But I can see it now, Susie, and it makes me unhappy.'

'There is no need, Philip. I have had a heavy cold. Perhaps that has made me paler than usual.'

'But it is more than that, Susie. You have lost your spirits lately. You are not the same girl that you were a few months ago.'

'I am so much alone, you see, and solitude is not conducive to high spirits. You would not have me laugh all by myself, would you? People would think I was mad.'

'I shouldn't care what they thought, so long as you were happy. But what can I do for you, dear? Shall I send for Mrs George to come and keep you company?'

His wife shrinks visibly.

'Oh, no! pray, don't. I prefer to be alone any day.'

'You have a prejudice against Mrs George, my child.'

'I don't care for her, if that is what you mean. And what would be the use of her coming. You know perfectly well that she would always be with you instead of me, and I should be left alone as much as now.'

Lord Luton regards his wife steadfastly, and with a little curiosity. Susie is coming out in a new character. He has never heard her speak so decidedly before.

'Well, what *can* I do for you then? Would you like to learn to ride? I saw a lovely bay pony yesterday, that I had half a mind to buy for you, but I thought I would ascertain your wishes first.'

'I am glad you didn't buy it. I don't think I should care to ride—alone.'

'But *I* would ride with you, my darling, of course, or one of my cousins would.'

'No, thank you, Philip. It is not want of occupation that makes me ill. I daresay I could find plenty of things to do if I had the energy to set about it. But the air of this place is killing me.'

'The air of Lutonstowe! My dear girl, what nonsense. It is considered the healthiest in England.'

'I don't care what it is considered,' says Susie, talking with startling rapidity; 'but it stifles me. I cannot breathe in it. Oh! Philip, if you love me as you say you do, let me go away from here, or I shall die.'

'My dear child, where would you go?'

'Let me go back to my father! I am not happy here. I would much rather go upon the stage again. I told you before we were married that I was not fit to hold the position of your wife. It is too high for me; it makes me miserable. I want work, the honest, common work to which I was born. Oh, Philip, do let me go back to the stage!'

Lord Luton looks very grave. His wife's appeal is as unexpected as it is unflattering to him. She was so short a time upon the boards, that he never supposed she would miss the excitement of a theatrical life, and he had hoped that by this time she had almost forgotten that she had been an actress. So that her proposition, utterly absurd as he considers it, startles as much as it displeases him.

'What nonsense you are talking!' he replies, sternly. 'Do you forget that you are my wife? Do you suppose I wish all my servants to know that Lady Luton has been on the stage? What sort of respect do you suppose they would pay

you if they did? And how do you suppose your request must appear to *me*, who raised you from your Bohemian calling to share my name?'

'I was happier then,' sobs Susie; 'I was happier with father and Louie Montressor than I am here. I was somebody there, and here I am *nobody*, not even to you.'

'But you are making a great mistake, my darling,' says Philip, whose lordly anger is already evaporating at the sight of her tears. 'You are a very, *very* great deal to me; in fact you are *everything*.'

'I am not! I know I am not,' she wails.

'And I repeat that you *are*. But under any circumstances, how can you talk of going back to the stage? Do you understand that you are the wife of a peer of the realm. How would it be possible for you to appear before the public as a common player! Do you think I would allow it? If you attempted such a thing, I would disown you for ever.'

'If you loved me,' continues the girl,

still sobbing, 'I could be happy anywhere; but when I know that your thoughts are all given to others, I feel as if I should go mad or die.'

'Susie,' says Lord Luton gravely, 'I can only repeat that you are labouring under some great mistake. How are my thoughts given to others? Have I not lavished on you as much love as it is in my nature to give a woman? Have I not endowed you with all that I possess? I call Heaven to witness that there is not a thing which it is in my power to give you which should not be yours for the asking.'

'Prove it to me, then,' cries the excited girl, springing to her feet. '*Prove* the words you have just called God to witness. Give me the picture of yourself that hangs in the octagon boudoir!'

At this request Lord Luton rises as hastily as herself. He looks as though he were dazed by the knowledge she evinces.

'*What!*' he exclaims, wonderingly; 'what is it you say? The picture in the

octagon boudoir! Who has *dared* to take you into that boudoir or show you that picture?'

'*I have dared*,' she answers, defiantly. 'Am I not Lady Luton, and the mistress of this house? *Who* is to order where I am to go or not to go?'

'*I* will,' says her husband firmly. 'You are the mistress of this house, but I am the master of the mistress, and I forbid you entering a room which I have ordered to be kept locked up.'

'Then I *have* entered it, and you cannot undo what I have done. You said just now, Luton, that there was not a thing which it was in your power to give me which should not be mine for the asking. Well, I ask you for that picture! I want it for my own. Will you give it to me?'

'*I will not*,' he answers, shaking his head. 'If you want a portrait of me, I will have another painted, twice as good, if it so pleases you; but I will not give you that one.'

'I will accept no other. I wish for that identical picture.'

'Then you cannot have it, Susie.'

'Why not?'

'I have my own reasons for not giving it to you.'

'What are they?'

'I cannot tell you.'

'But I can tell *you*,' replies the girl, with eyes that flash fire upon him. 'It is because you had that portrait painted for *her*, the false, wicked woman, who betrayed your love and your name and your honour. It is because you keep everything that belonged to her locked up in that very room, and will allow no other hands to touch them but your own. It is because you love the very memory of the wife who thought so little of you or your presents, that she left them all for the sake of a man she had only known a month. And this is what you call your love *for me!* You ought to have been ashamed to offer any honest woman the dregs of such a heart.'

Lord Luton, who has turned very pale during this tirade, can only say in answer,—

'*You are mad!*'

'No, I am not mad!' exclaims Susie, looking like a lovely Bacchante in her passion. 'It is *you* who are false to the promises you made me. Do you suppose that I am deaf and blind? That I cannot hear and see what other people tell and point out to me? That I have no senses to judge for myself? Why, only the other night as you lay asleep—and I was awake through pain and misery—I heard you call upon her name—her shameful name, that you should scorn to utter—and say, "Magdalena! Magdalena!"'

'If I did,' replies Lord Lutton, 'it can only have been from the force of habit; and you must forgive me, Susie.'

'I will *not* forgive you,' she cries, shrilly; 'I will never forgive you for taking me away from my father and my profession, and everything I loved, for such a fate as this. To be the *substitute* for a wretched woman who was not fit to sit in the same

room with me! To serve as a *distraction* from your thoughts of her! To be your *wife*, nothing more, whilst *she* still reigns in your heart, and claims your remembrance and regret! Oh, I hate you for it!—I *hate* you for it.'

And with this assertion on her lips, Lady Luton rushes from the room, leaving her husband half paralysed by the vehemence of her reproaches and her rage.

Meanwhile Susie, scarcely conscious of the terrible breach her behaviour will make between them, blunders blindly upstairs, with the intention of seeking her own room. But at the first turning of the broad, low staircase she is confronted by an Apparition that almost stops her breath. The Woman once more stands before her, and, to Susie's indignation, has apparently issued from her own sleeping-chamber. There she halts upon the landing, with one hand still upon the door, and the other extended with a threatening demeanour, as though she forbade her rival to pass the threshold. Lady Luton's first

feeling of terror is quickly succeeded by one of anger. There is no mistaking her visitant. She has come in the same white dress, clinging about her lissom figure; her dark curling hair clusters over her brow; her pallid face looks corpse-like in the gloaming; and her dark eyes burn like lurid fires, whilst on her silent but expressive lips hover the same words as before—'*He is mine! he is mine!*' But after the interview that has just passed between Lord Luton and herself, Susie is in no mood to take an insult quietly. All she feels is, that this Woman, who has been the cause of their quarrel—this disgraced and dishonoured Wife, who still occupies his thoughts, and has ousted her—the lawful occupant—from his heart, has *dared* to enter the house which is hers—*hers* by right and law—and that, at all costs, she shall be ejected.

She gives a scream as she first encounters her rival—a scream that brings Lord Luton, anxiously listening, to the open door of the drawing-room; and then

she advances upon her boldly, but with the courage of desperation.

'How *dare* you come here?' she exclaims, loudly; 'you bad, insolent woman. You may occupy my husband's heart if you will, but whilst *I* am his wife, you shall never occupy his house.'

But still the silent figure gazes at her and whispers with knitted brows,—'*He is mine!*'

'*He is not!*' cries Susie fiercely; 'he is *mine* by every law of God and man, and if you attempt to cross my path to seek him, I will strike you to the ground.'

'Susie! Susie! for heaven's sake, to whom are you speaking?' exclaims Lord Luton, forgetting everything in his astonishment as he rushes up the staircase after her.

'To whom am I speaking?' she replies; 'to the Creature who was your wife. To the Woman who has dared, now for the third time, to intrude herself upon my presence. For your sake—to spare your feelings—I have not told you this before.

But she thrust herself into my room at Scarborough, and again in London, and now she has presumed to come to Luton-stowe. But I will bear it no longer. Either *she* leaves this house for ever, or *I* do.'

'Susie! what can you mean? You are dreaming! Of whom do you speak?' says Philip, as he tries to detain the excited girl in his arms.

But as he reaches the landing, the Figure moves slowly backward into the room from which it emerged into Lady Luton's bed-chamber and the sight drives Susie wild.

'Let me go!' she gasps, struggling in her husband's arms; 'let me go, Philip! If you permit her to enter that room, I will never sleep in it more. How *dare* she? How *dare* she? And you can stand by and see her do it? Oh! you are as bad as herself. But I will meet her face to face, and turn her from the doors with my own hands.'

Lord Luton is now seriously alarmed.

He really believes that his wife has contracted some distemper, and is delirious with disease. And so, though he holds her all the tighter in his arms, he tries to soothe her into a calmer state of mind.

'You are mistaken, my darling. There is no one there, indeed. Tell me what it is that frightens you, Susie, and I will clear the house of it at once.'

She turns her glowing eyes upon his face.

'You will not! You would not give me the picture because it belonged to her, and you have said that if she gave you the chance you would forgive her everything, and take her back again; and you shall not have the chance—you shall not have it.'

'My dear, you are dreaming! I do not know of whom you speak.'

'It is not true. I have told you already I speak of the woman who was your wife, and who haunts me wherever I go. You must have seen her standing on the landing in

her white dress, with her dark, curly hair hanging over her pale face, and her black eyes glowing like balls of fire. You saw her—I know you did; and it is *you* who have brought her here.'

'Dark, curly hair—pale face—eyes like balls of fire,' repeats Lord Luton, who, believing that Susie has never even seen a photograph of her predecessor, is staggered by the accurate description; 'who can have told you this?'

'I tell you I have *seen* her, more than once,' replies the girl, with a stamp of the foot, 'and that she is in that room now! Loose me, will you, and let me go?'

Then he does loose her, without further comment, but it is to rush past her into the chamber she has indicated to him, calling, in an agitated voice,—

'Magdalena!'

As he slams the door after him, Susie, gazing for a moment at the place where he has disappeared, with eyes that look as if they could not compass their mis-

fortune, gives a low cry of misery and disappointment, and runs rapidly downstairs in an opposite direction.

Lord Luton searches every corner of the large and richly-furnished apartment, but there is no sign of its having any occupant. Thence he passes quickly into his own room, which adjoins it, and through it to the back part of the house, and out of a door which leads into the grounds. He does not ask a question of anyone whom he encounters. The words seem to die upon his tongue before they are uttered, but he searches carefully as he goes until he has reached the gates of the lower drive; then he runs along the open road for miles, looking under every hedge for the woman he is in pursuit of, but without success, until the chiming of the church clock reminds him that his dinner hour has arrived.

As he paces homeward slowly, bareheaded and fatigued, he begins to think what a fool he has made of himself. Is it probable in the least degree (he argues)

that Magdalena should venture to show herself at Lutonstowe—at the place where every villager and servant would recognise her person, and is cognisant of her shame? Why, his sense alone should teach him it would be the last spot in the world the poor creature would wish to revisit. And to enter the very presence of his wife—it bears absurdity upon the face of it! And yet how accurately Susie described her!—how violently agitated the poor child was!—how decidedly she asserted that Magdalena had visited her already! Is it possible that she can have been deceived—that someone has been playing a trick upon her—that what she believes to have been the person of his first wife is only an hallucination of her brain? It may be so—it *must* be so. Anything is easier to believe than that the misguided woman who left his protection, and is severed from his life by a decree no less stern than death, should have the assurance to thrust herself under his notice again.

But having decided this matter with himself, Lord Luton's thoughts turn once more to Susie. Is his little girl going to be ill, or is she ill already, and have these imaginary phantoms been a part of her disease? If so, he must take her away from Lutonstowe back to the Continent, or to any place where her mind will be diverted from such harassing ideas. How foolish he was to thwart her this afternoon. It all arose out of the paltry dispute about that horrid picture.

At this juncture Lord Luton's conscience begins to prick him, and he wishes sincerely he had yielded to her desire. After all it could not much signify. It was her love for him that had prompted the request, and she had entirely mistaken the motive of his refusal. The fact is that Philip loves the girl he has won far more purely and deeply than she has any idea of—more than he even knows himself; and he cannot bear to think that any article that has been polluted by a bad woman's touch shall reach her hands. He

believes in the power of influence, and that certain substances can convey it by contact from one person to another. For this reason he has destroyed or sent away every one of the personal effects of his late wife; but the contents of the octagon boudoir were so much too valuable to be disposed of wholesale, that he ordered them to be all locked up together. He could not have borne to have seen Susie's pure neck and bosom adorned with the same jewels that had hung on Magdalena's, nor to have watched her fingers toying with the articles which had been despised gifts from him to the other woman. And so the very means by which he has shown his love and respect for the innocent girl he has married has been transformed by jealousy into a cause for quarrelling and misery.

It is too often so in this world. Men and women do not understand each other, and they never will. They have a totally different way of loving, and each one wants the other to love in his or her way.

The man loves largely and broadly. The very reticence he uses towards his wife—the restrictions he places on her—the objections he raises to the enhancement of her charms—are so many proofs of the value in which he holds her affections. But the woman loves narrowly and exactingly. She wants to know everything, to hear everything, and to have everything. She wishes all other women to envy her choice, and yet her husband must never have a female friend. She plumes herself on his paying her attention in public, and yet will pretend the while that she is utterly indifferent to it. She exacts his confidence to the utmost degree, and yet will treat her female gossips to the recital of his most sacred feelings and affections. And so she wearies out his love even before she has worried it out, and ends her married life with no more real knowledge of the workings of his heart and mind than when she began it.

Susie is naturally the most ignorant of the ignorant in this matter. She knows

positively nothing of men, except as she has seen them in the person of Lord Luton; and unfortunately she has commenced her life with him under a great disadvantage, coming, as she has done, fresh and innocent to the care of a man who has already been injured and deceived. Philip has not thought enough of this hitherto, but the fact forces itself upon his mind now as he walks rapidly homewards, and he resolves that very night to take his little girl into his confidence, and speak openly with her on the subject of the past. He will tell her the whole history of Magdalena, and set her heart at rest for ever on the idea that he cherishes any tenderer feeling than compassion for an unfortunate woman, who deliberately threw away every chance of happiness that she possessed. And he will thank his darling—oh! so warmly, Philip thinks—for consenting to come into his barren life and make it bloom again. He walks faster as these resolutions crowd upon

him, anxious to reach her presence, and allay her fears and doubts for ever. As he gains his hall door, he perceives a footman standing on the step ready to receive him.

'It is half-past seven, my lord,' he says; 'I was just thinking of coming after your lordship to see if I could find you.'

'Serve dinner at once,' replies Philip; 'I was strolling in the grounds and forgot the time. Is her ladyship down yet?'

'No! my lord—'

Philip bounds up the staircase and enters his wife's room. The lamps are lighted, and Susie's dress laid out upon the bed, but the only person he encounters is her maid, waiting for her return.

'Where is Lady Luton?' he inquires, hastily.

'I don't know, my lord. I think her ladyship must be in the grounds. I have not seen her since luncheon time.'

'How very strange,' he says; 'send someone out to find her and tell her

dinner is on the table.' But as he passes into his dressing-room he thinks to himself,—'My poor darling!—she is as miserable as I am, and rushing about frantically to try and get rid of her thoughts.'

A few minutes later he is in the drawing-room, apologising to his cousins.

'You must forgive us, old boys. Lady Luton and I seem both to have forgotten the time to-day. I was only rescued by chance, and she is still wandering about somewhere I suppose, blissfully imagining it is about six o'clock. But we won't wait for her, so let us go in and proceed with our dinner.'

But when the meal is concluded, and the messenger returns to say he can find her ladyship nowhere, Lord Luton becomes uneasy.

'What fools girls are,' he says, impatiently, to his cousins; 'I was warning my wife only this afternoon to take more care of herself this nasty weather; and so, I suppose, to show her independence, she goes wandering about to all hours. But

she'll catch it when she comes back, I can tell her that. Will you go on to the billiard-room? I will join you there in a few minutes. I have a couple of letters to write.'

He walks leisurely into the library as he speaks, and sits down before his own blotting-case. As he opens it, a folded scrap of paper catches his eye. He seizes it and reads the following words, hurriedly scrawled in pencil,—

'I cannot bear this state of things any longer. I am going back to my father. If you have any respect or consideration for me, you will leave me there. SUSIE.'

Lord Luton's first feeling on reading this note is one of intense disappointment, the next of indignation. He takes up his pen and writes direct to Joseph Gresham :—

'DEAR MR GRESHAM,—Susie has left Lutonstowe to pay you a visit without consulting me. Please understand dis-

tinctly that, if she goes on the stage again, it will be against my express orders to the contrary, and I do not sanction it, nor will I answer for the consequences. Pray use all your influence to deter her from such folly.—I am, yours truly, LUTON.'

He sends a man on horseback to the nearest town to catch the evening mail with this letter, and the next morning he receives a telegram from Gresham :—

'Susie is with me, and wishes to remain for a while. Do not be afraid that I shall sanction any such madness as you allude to. If you wish her to return home, say so.'

To which Lord Luton writes in answer:—

'I do not wish her to return home until she does so of her own accord. Let her remain with you as long as she pleases.'

And then he tries to dismiss the subject

from his mind, and to believe that his wife is only paying an ordinary visit to her friends. He is obliged to excuse her sudden absence to his visitors on the score that she had received a letter to say her father was ill, which had nearly driven her wild with fright; and he tells the same story to her maid, and orders her to pack a box with everything her mistress may require, and send it after her, as she will not return until her father is convalescent. But he is very miserable the while. He sees now that Susie has taken things even more seriously than he thought; but he cannot excuse on any score the perplexity into which she has plunged him. And he is too proud to write and tell her what he feels at her desertion, or to explain (as he meant to do by word of mouth) the mistake into which she has fallen with regard to his feelings for his first wife.

So he mopes inwardly, and all the more that he tells his feelings to no one, and watches feverishly for the daily ad-

vent of the postman, who comes and goes without bringing him any further tidings of the girl who occupies all his thoughts. One day, about a week after her departure, a servant enters his study with the announcement,—

'Lady Luton is in the drawing-room, my lord.'

Philip springs to his feet, with an exclamation of pleasure.

'When did she return, James?'

'Her ladyship drove over from High Beech this moment, my lord.'

'From High Beech? Do you mean my mother is here?'

'Yes, my lord. In the drawing-room, with Miss Luton, my lord.'

Philip's momentary disappointment is counterbalanced by surprise. His mother, who has not seen him ever since the elopement of his first wife, paying him a voluntary visit at Lutonstowe! He can hardly believe the truth, yet his handsome face flushes with pleasure. The estrangement with his family has been

a sore trial to his affectionate nature, although he has been too proud to admit the truth. But now he runs into the drawing-room, with the alacrity of a boy, and falls into her arms, crying,—

'Oh! mother, mother, this *is* good of you. I thought we were never going to meet again.'

The old lady is very much overcome by the sight of her son, and his sister scarcely less so. For some minutes, Philip's outburst of joy is followed by silence, whilst the women wipe their tears away, and Lord Luton himself has occasion to brush his eyes with the back of his hand.

'My dear, *dear* boy!' says the old lady, as she sinks into a chair and draws him down beside her, 'I have been praying for this day for years past. Thank God! it has come at last. We have missed you sadly at High Beech, Philip, but you know the reason which estranged us, my son, and that I could not have brought your sisters to Lutonstowe whilst

you filled the house with disreputable men and women.'

'Yes, yes, dear mother, but that is all past now. You must make some allowance for the pain from which I was suffering. It drove me mad. I had no relief from it except in rioting and wantonness.'

'A very sorry relief for a Christian man,' replies old Lady Luton gravely; 'but as you truly say, *that* must be all past now. Margaret and I have seen your sweet young wife, Philip. We have not told you that yet. We met her one day accidentally in the woods, and had a long talk with her, though she had no idea who we were. But we discovered what an innocent girl she is, and felt that the house that contained her must be purified from all its former evil. You have picked up a treasure, my son, wherever you found her — a child, for whom, in order to guide aright, you must keep your own hands and heart clean.'

'Yes! She is childish enough,' says Lord Luton curtly.

'We had heard already from Lady Montwarren that you had married an actress, and I was naturally very much distressed at the news. The members of our family have always set their faces strongly against *mésalliances*, and I could not but consider this marriage of yours as one, but my acquaintance with your sweet wife has changed my views. Indeed, I could hardly believe she had been upon the stage, although she told us so herself. She seems so simple and unworldly.'

'And she is what she seems, mother. She was only on the boards for a few months. She is motherless, and was brought up from her birth by her great-aunt, a very strict old lady, who lived at Malisbury.'

'At Malisbury! How singular! The poor child told me she was motherless, and with so touching an air that I longed to be able to promise her my care and affection. Where is she, Philip? Let us

see her without delay! I am anxious to kiss my new daughter, and assure her that she shall find a friend in me.'

'How good you are to me, mother; far better than I deserve,' replies Lord Luton wearily. 'But I cannot summon Susie to you. She has left me!'

'*Left you!*' exclaim both the ladies simultaneously, in voices of alarm.

'No, no! not *that*, dear mother. Susie will never give me a recurrence of the past. She is too good and pure for such a thing. But I confess she left me rather suddenly. We had had a slight—a slight difference of opinion, and she chose to return to her father. She is with him now. That is all. But I hope she will see her mistake before long, and return to Lutonstowe.'

'Philip,' says his mother gravely, 'was your "difference of opinion" (as you chose to call it) in reference to your late wife?'

'Why! mother! what can have put that into your head?'

'What we gathered from the child's own lips, Philip, whilst she thought we were strangers to you. We found her cast down at the foot of a tree, and sobbing as if her heart would break, and in her innocence she answered the questions I put to her so freely, that I soon arrived at a knowledge of the truth. Philip, my son, answer me. Can it possibly be true that you have married this young creature whilst a remnant of the old infatuation you entertained for Magdalena lingers in your heart?'

'No! mother, *no!*' replies Lord Luton emphatically. 'I have not; and it is a delusion on the part of Susie to suppose so. I love her as fondly as a man can love a woman, and cannot imagine what has put such an idea in her head.'

'*Who* has put, it you mean,' retorts the old lady caustically. '*Someone* has, you may rest assured of that, for your wife is no fool, and girls don't break their hearts and cry their eyes out for nothing. A woman is at the bottom of the mischief,

I know. Is your wife acquainted with that Mrs George Lambert, Philip?'

'Oh, yes! they saw a good deal of each other in London. But there's no harm in Mrs George, mother.'

'Well, opinions may differ on that score, my dear; and, in any case, she's not a proper friend for your wife. She is as likely as anyone to have poisoned her mind on the subject.'

'But Susie has the most extraordinary delusions herself, and fancies she has seen my late wife and spoken to her, and I know it's all rubbish.'

'Perhaps she has fretted about it until her mind has become unhinged. At anyrate, Philip, it is your part now to undeceive her.'

'How am I to do it, mother?'

'Go after her, my dear, wherever she may be, and persuade her to come home again, and Margaret and I will do the rest.'

'You have eased my heart of half its burden, mother. I will start for Bath this very afternoon.'

'That's spoken like my own son. And when you find your Susie again, bring her straight to High Beech to make the acquaintance of her mother and sisters-in-law. There must never be any misunderstanding between us again, Philip. This one has caused too much misery already.'

Fully acquiescing in his mother's opinion, Lord Luton puts her and his sister in their carriage, and starts for Bath, where Mr Gresham's company is at that time performing, with a lighter heart than he has borne for years past.

Arrived at his destination, he rushes at once to the temporary residence of his father-in-law, to demand his wife. But he is met, to his astonishment, with the information that she has returned home.

'Returned to Lutonstowe! *When?*' cries Philip.

'Yesterday afternoon, Lord Luton. I soon found out that it was all a piece of nonsense between you and her, that only wanted a word and a kiss to patch up again, and so I talked to the girl, and per-

suaded her to go home and not make a fool of herself, and she left us yesterday afternoon. Didn't she, Henrietta?'

'She did—by the three o'clock train,' replies Mrs Gresham, who is present at the interview.

'But she had not arrived when I left Lutonstowe,' says Philip; 'and it is only a four-hours' journey.'

'She has stayed a night in London on the way,' replies Gresham confidently. 'She is not looking over and above strong, and I advised her to take it easy. Don't you think I'm right, Henrietta?'

'You may be,' says his wife cautiously, 'though Susie didn't tell me where she intended to spend the night. But Lord Luton may make sure she isn't lost. She's quite able to look after herself.'

'I suppose so,' replies Philip, rather despondently; 'yet I wish she had gone straight to Lutonstowe. It would have saved me this journey.'

'Well, the best thing you can do, my lord, is to cut after her,' says Gresham,

who, although he has urged his daughter to return to the protection of her husband, is not over and above pleased at the disclosures which she has made of her home life to him.

'Yes! I suppose you are right,' replies Luton, as he takes leave of the Greshams, and travels back to Lutonstowe.

'But he won't find Susie there—not now, nor for many months to come,' asserts the quondam Mrs Jarrod to herself; 'for the cards say so, and they never lie.'

And she is right. When Lord Luton reaches his home, it is still empty, and notwithstanding all his inquiries, it remains empty until spring and summer have passed, and the autumn leaves lie dark and drear upon the woodland paths again.

CHAPTER III.

SUSIE'S BLOOD ASSERTS ITSELF.

WHEN Susie (retrospectively speaking) saw Lord Luton disappear behind the door of her bed-chamber, she rushed downstairs and away from him, to avoid, as she believed, the inevitable sight of his meeting with her rival. The voice of anguish in which he uttered the name of 'Magdalena,' conveyed nothing but despair to her jealous, doubting heart, and she resolved on the moment that it would be far easier to part with him at once than to live after she had been made certain that he had never cared for her. With this thought

only in her mind, the girl ran down to the library, where she had left her hat and cloak, on coming in from her afternoon walk.

As she thrust them on, all trembling with her anxiety to be gone, before she heard another sound from the upper storey, she caught sight of her husband's blotting-book, and realised the necessity of letting him know the reason of her flight. So she hastily wrote the words she left behind her, and then passed quickly through the library window which opened to the ground, upon the lawn, and thence into the road. It was three miles to the nearest station across the fields, but Susie ran almost the whole way, so little heed did her burning heart permit her to take of physical distress or need. She was fortunate enough to reach the station just as the last train was starting for London, and so, whilst Lord Luton was slowly plodding his way homewards, little thinking he should find his house robbed of its greatest treasure, she was speeding in the

opposite direction as fast as steam could take her from him.

She was compelled to remain some hours in London, but a night mail took her down to Bath, and she appeared at her father's lodgings, jaded and worn, just as he and his wife were sitting down to their breakfast the following morning.

Gresham did not like this irruption on his daughter's part. He was very proud of her being Lord Luton's wife, and justly considered she had no right to go rushing about the country alone at untoward hours. Added to which, he did not understand the reason for her doing so. Susie did not tell him the story of the appearance of Magdalena, because she knew her father would ridicule it as a piece of folly; neither did she say as much as she might have done of her own doubts and suspicions regarding her husband's fidelity. But she let out that she and Lord Luton did not agree in all things as they ought to do, and that she was restless and unhappy in her new life, and longed for a sight of the old faces

again. And Mr Gresham did not sympathise in her longings. He had never heard any nonsense of this kind with Susie's mother. His Bessie had always been obedient and contented with all he did for her, and he had no patience with a girl who wanted more than Susie had got. He listened to her complaints, with an expression the reverse of sympathetic, and when she had finished her story, he rose from the table, and told her the best thing she could do was to take the next train back to Lutonstowe. But Lady Luton insisted emphatically that she had no intention of returning home until she knew how matters had progressed down there. Then came her husband's letter, and Mr Gresham's telegram and the answer in due course, giving her permission to do as she pleased in the matter.

Even then, Joseph Gresham agrees to her remaining with them for a few weeks but grudgingly, and tells her she is a fool for her pains at the same time. But Susie finds a much more sympathetic listener in

her step-mother, Mrs Gresham, who is now perhaps at the happiest period of her life. Her occupation perfectly suits her, and she perfectly suits her occupation. To inspect and choose the dresses for the burlesque, and see them executed with the most rigid economy; to look after the morals of the ladies of the company, and sternly interrupt all flirting in the wings, and to superintend the smaller matters with which theatrical management is rife—is pure enjoyment to Mrs Gresham. She is actively busy from morning to night. The first thing after breakfast she goes down to the theatre, and does not leave it (except for her meals) till the last lamp is extinguished at night.

To say that Gresham's celebrated comedy and burlesque company is the happier for Mrs Gresham's superintendence, would be a misnomer; but it is certainly more orderly, more regular, and drawing fuller receipts. And Mr Gresham gets on with his new wife capitally. A younger woman would not have suited him. He is too old now for philandering;

it would have wearied instead of pleasing him, and taken too much time from the business. But Henrietta Jarrod suits him down to the ground. He can go away at any moment now to have a conference with a brother manager, or to run up to London to see a new star, and feel that his company will be just as well looked after when his back is turned. He troubles himself no longer about what is going on on the stage, but devotes all his time to the money and check-takers, and consequently does not get so often cheated in front. In fact, his wife is invaluable to him, and he often wonders how he ever did without her.

The reason he says so little to Susie on the subject of her unlicensed visit to him is because he believes that Henrietta will be able to manage the matter better than himself, and point out to the young wife the folly of acting in any way against the wishes of her husband.

How greatly he would be astonished if he could look back into that little parlour

and hear the confidence that is exchanged between them as soon as he is out of sight!

'*You* don't think my conduct wrong or mysterious, I am sure—you, who know everything before it happens?' says Susie, glancing timidly at her step-mother.

'No, my dear, I don't,' replies Mrs Gresham determinately. 'I've lived long enough in this world to know that what "must be, must be," and that we can no more alter the fate that's written in the stars for us than we can fly. I saw all this coming long ago, and you must remember that I told you as much at Cheltenham.'

'I know you did, and I have thought of it so often since. You told me it was the Living and not the Dead of whom I must beware, and yet I was so foolish I never remembered your words until it was too late. But you see, dear, don't you,' continues Susie, kneeling down caressingly by the side of her father's wife, 'that I *couldn't* stay there under the circumstances? Fancy her being in the very

same house with me! It was enough to drive me mad. And to hear him call her "Magdalena" too! I didn't tell father all, you know, because men think so differently about such things; but Philip loves her (I am sure of it) better than he does me, and I feel as if I should die with grief at the very idea.'

'No, he doesn't,' replies Mrs Gresham decidedly; 'he doesn't love her better than he does you, nor did he ever love her as well as he does you. But that doesn't alter the fact that neither you nor he will ever realise the truth of what I say without a separation. Let things work round of themselves, Susie. You won't be happy again yet awhile. I can see that plainly, but if you'll be patient and wait, you'll have it before you die.'

'No, never! *never!*' cries the girl passionately. 'I love every hair of his head, and I am nothing to him in comparison with his remembrance of her. Oh, Mrs Gresham! how *can* there be happiness without equal love? It is such pain to

me I cannot bear it. And I want to go back to the stage and support myself. I was happier and freer there, and in the excitement of work I may learn to forget I ever met him.'

'But what will your father say to that, Susie?'

'He has no right to prevent me.'

'True, but your husband has, and Gresham will never consent to keeping it a secret from him.'

'Then *you* will help me, dear friend. I will take another name, and you will help me to get an engagement, and lose myself and my troubles for a little while in work. For I will *never* go back to Lutonstowe.'

'You must let me think a bit about it, Susie. I'll lay the cards again for you this evening, and see what they say. If it's marked out for you to go away for a while, I'll not oppose it. But mark one thing, child. Losing yourself won't make you lose the curly-headed woman with the black eyes. She's part and parcel

of your life, and that part isn't lived out yet. So don't think to escape her by running away, for you might as well try to run away from yourself.'

Susie looks aghast.

'Oh, can't you save me from her? I hate the very sight of her. It will kill me.'

Her companion looks somewhat contemptuous.

'What do you take me for, Susie, to talk such folly? Can *I* alter the destiny that has been chalked out for you at the birth of the stars? I thought you had more sense. Why do you ask to hear what they foretell you if you think it can be altered at your will?'

'But to think of meeting her again! It is too terrible. I am sure that she hates me like poison. I am afraid to look into her eyes.'

'I'm not so sure that she'll always hate you—or you her—strange as it may seem to think of such a thing. Your stars are very close together, and you won't die strangers, however you may live.'

'I am sure that I could never touch her hand even to save my life,' says Susie, with a shudder. 'I suppose this is what comes of marrying out of one's own sphere. Why couldn't I have been content to be the wife of some actor, like Arthur Brisbane, instead of raising my eyes to a man whose friends and relations consider me beneath them? But I love him so, Mrs Gresham!—I do love him so!'

'Well! if you love him, you're not beneath him,' says Mrs Gresham curtly; 'love levels all things. There can't be anything higher than love, and so it reaches to a throne. Not that I considered your marriage with Lord Luton a very prudent one. I foresaw trouble and scandal from it, and it has come. Much as it did to me,' she half murmurs to herself.

'Dear! I have heard sometimes that *your* first marriage was not a happy one. Was it like mine? Did your husband love someone better than he did you?'

'Your question raises sad memories in me, child! I have never spoken of my

first marriage to a soul in the profession, not even your father; but I don't mind you hearing the truth of it. I can trust those honest eyes to keep my secret. I *did* marry above me, Susie. I was a girl on the stage as you were (though not so pretty), and *he* (Edward Tressilyan was his name) was a captain in a cavalry regiment, a man of good family but small means. Well! he fell in love with me (or he thought he did), and he would have me—and I was so flattered with his persistence, that I gave in, although I was always gifted with foresight, and knew, even then, that I should be miserable as his wife. It soon came about, my dear. He took me off the stage for a few months, and then he found a wife was too expensive a luxury to keep on captain's pay, and began to run in debt on all sides. His people, too, would not receive me, on account of my former profession, and refused to help Edward whilst we lived together. So one fine day his love suddenly evaporated, and he told me, with an oath, to go back to the stage

and support myself. It was an awful blow to me, Susie, for I was only two-and-twenty, and I loved him. However, I obeyed him, and took back the name which I had dropped for his; and I have remained on the stage ever since.'

'And did you never see him afterwards?' demands Susie, with open eyes.

Yes! my dear, sometimes, when he wanted money. My gentleman was not too proud to borrow a few pounds occasionally from his cast-off wife, and I,—well I was fool enough to give them to him. So he kept me pretty poor till his death, which happened a few years ago, and, then, you see, his good old uncle (who, I believe, must have known the truth during Edward's lifetime), left me an annuity of four hundred a-year. It was very good of the old man, wasn't it? for he had never seen me to my knowledge, and certainly knew nothing of me.'

'It was little enough,' cries Susie, with moist eyes, 'considering what you had done for his nephew! Oh, Mrs Gresham,

why are we poor women always destined to give so much more than we receive?'

'Ah, my dear, *that* I can't tell you, for there's nothing about it in the cards. But, come, Susie, if you're not tired, let us go down to rehearsal; the girls will be finely pleased to see you again. I expect there'll be more fuss than enough behind the scenes over my Lady Luton.'

Susie sighs heavily as she follows Mrs Gresham, and though, as the latter anticipates, the members of her father's company cannot make too much of her, the pleasure of renewing old acquaintances and forming new ones is altogether marred by the dull, heavy pain which the poor child carries ever at her heart.

'It must be a fine thing to be a titled lady,' says Louie Montressor, who is as pert as ever, and strikes Susie now as being rather vulgar; 'but don't you sometimes wish you were back amongst us again, Susie? Don't you feel queer when seven o'clock comes, and you remember that there is no need for you to hurry

down to the theatre and dress before the curtain rings up?'

'Indeed I do, Louie, very often,' replies Lady Luton, with a sigh; 'I miss the fun and the talking, and our dear old suppers of hot potatoes in the dressing-room dreadfully.'

'I should think you had hardly time to miss anything, Lady Luton,' says Miss de Vere, who prefers the dignity of addressing Susie by her married name; 'I suppose your evenings are all taken up with dinners and parties?'

'No; we don't go out much,' replies Susie, blushing. 'Lord Luton and I are living in the country at present, and it is rather dull than otherwise.'

'Fancy being dull with that dear, handsome fellow for a husband, and a lord into the bargain!' cries Miss Louie; 'why, Susie, I wish I had only half your luck. And look at the child's cloak, too, Gerry, sealskin, trimmed with sable. Who wouldn't be a lady? Give *me* such dulness for ever, say I.'

'I only meant that the weather is dull,' says Lady Luton; 'and all private life must seem prosy after being on the stage. Do you ever get any bouquets now, Louie?'

'Plenty, my dear, at the wide-awake towns; I should think I did—rather; but Bath is the dullest hole on earth. I don't believe there's a man under eighty in it.'

'That's a bad look-out,' laughs Susie.

'Yes; I wish you'd brought Lord Luton with you. He'd have dressed up our stalls a bit, and maybe he'd have given me a bouquet if I'd looked very sweet at him. And fancy you're living with your father again and old Mother—I mean, Mrs Gresham. How rum it must seem to you! Don't you feel as if you'd got out of bed with your wrong leg first of a morning?'

'It could never feel strange to me to be staying with my own father,' replies Susie, and though she was so anxious to meet her old chum again, she feels somehow as if she had gone beyond Louie

Montressor and the rest of them, and their style of conversation sounds rougher to her ears, and jars upon her senses as it never used to do in the old days; so though she visits the theatre each night, she does not seek out her old companions in their private haunts, and Miss Montressor votes that Lady Luton has been spoiled by her elevation to the peerage, and carries her head as high as if she were the Queen of England herself.

Gresham, although he said so little on the first morning of her appearance, has no intention of letting the subject of her illegal visit to him drop without further comment, and when two or three days have passed without Susie making any allusion to her return home, he tells her plainly that she ought not to stay there any longer.

'Are you tired of me, dear father, already?' she asks, with a feeble smile.

'Don't be nonsensical, child; you know well enough I am not, and never should be, but though your husband gave you per-

mission to remain, he is evidently anxious to have you home again; and, to tell you the truth, my dear, I don't think it's quite seemly for Lady Luton to be knocking about the country with a theatrical company, and without her husband.'

Susie's eyes blaze with indignation.

'Am I then to be ashamed of my own father and his profession, just because I've married Lord Luton?' she asks, sharply.

'No, no! my dear girl; you know I didn't mean that,' replies Gresham, inwardly pleased at the feeling she displays; 'but these lodgings are not fit for you, nor can my wife nor I pay you the attention we should like to. You see we're engrossed in business, my dear, and I'm afraid you must feel neglected. And, besides, Lord Luton must naturally expect you to return.'

'I am happy here. I don't want to go back,' says the girl softly.

'Nonsense! my pretty. You've had a tiff with his lordship; I understand that; and you'll have many more before you die.

All married people do. And if you're a sensible girl, you'll just go back to Lutonstowe, and kiss and make it up again. Go and put your pretty arms round his neck, and smile in his face, and it'll all be settled in five minutes. That's my advice to you, Susie, and the sooner you take it the better.'

'Very well, father. I'll leave, as you wish it,' she answers, quietly.

'And this nonsense about going back to the boards that Lord Luton writes about?' continues Gresham. 'You could never have meant such a thing, my dear. Why, it would be madness to think of it! *You* —with a title and money and estates and houses—to *dream* of being an actress again! You must be out of your mind, child. It's all the same as if I were to insist upon giving up management to break stones upon the road.'

'My mother was an actress,' replies Lady Luton proudly.

'So she was, God bless her! But then *I* wasn't a lord, my dear, and that makes

all the difference. However, I know you can never have been in earnest, so we'll say no more about it. Wait till you have a few babies climbing over you, Susie, and then we sha'n't hear any more of such nonsense. And I think his lordship must be a real good sort to bear with you as he has. But you will go back to him, my dear, now, won't you? We go straight off to Swansea on Sunday morning.'

'Yes, I'll leave you to-morrow, or next day, father,' says Susie quietly.

But as soon as Gresham's back is turned, she flings herself into her step-mother's arms, and sobs without restraint.

'Dear Mrs Gresham! you will be a mother to me, won't you, and help me out of this difficulty? *I cannot*—I *will not* go back to Lutonstowe. Send me to America or Australia, or as far away as you possibly can, so that I may never see England or *him* again!'

'I will do my best for you, Susie. I have promised it,' replies Mrs Gresham; 'but it puzzles me to decide what *is* the

best. I laid the cards for you again last night, my dear, and I'm quite satisfied that whether I interfere or not, you won't see Lutonstowe again for some time, and so I'd like to make your path as easy for you as I can. But as to Australia or America, I shouldn't like to take the initiative. You mustn't interfere too much with your destiny, my dear, but let things work round in their appointed way. And I don't see anything about crossing the sea in the cards.'

'What must I do then? You have many friends in the profession. Can't you give me a recommendation to any of them?'

'Yes, my dear, that I can, and I will do. But you must keep your own counsel, Susie. If it once comes out that you're Gresham's daughter, or Lord Luton's wife, it will be all up a tree.'

'Of course I shall. I will adopt some quiet name, and make friends of no one. What shall I call myself, Mrs Gresham? I hate a high-sounding title.'

'So do I! It's a custom I have always

put my foot upon. Anything will do. Suppose we say "Mary Lester." That's what I call a nondescript title. Neither pretty, ugly, fine, nor plain. Will you be *Miss Mary Lester*, Susie?'

'Yes, dear! because you chose it, if for no other reason. And to whom shall I go? You had better give me more than one introduction, in case I fail to get employment with the first.'

'No, Susie! I can't have you knocking about the country uncertain of a home. You're too young and too pretty, my dear, for that. I shall send you straight to Dick Carleton. Dick is an old friend of mine, and under sundry obligations to me, and has promised at any time to place anyone I may be interested in. Besides, he is the proprietor of three or four theatres in the north, and is continually having vacancies.'

She takes up her pen, and begins to write rapidly, as she speaks; and when she has concluded her letter, she reads it aloud.

'DEAR DICK,—I am about to send you by to-morrow's rail a young lady, a pupil of mine, in whom I am deeply interested, and for whom I urgently require an immediate engagement. Her name is Mary Lester. Please ask Mrs Carleton, with my love, to receive her kindly, as the poor child has experienced losses lately, and is in low spirits. She had some experience on the stage in burlesque with Joe's company last year. But I wish her now to go into melo-drama. If you can't fit her with a place north, send her over the border. But do the best you can for her, under any circumstances. This is *my* matter, so when you communicate about it, please to address me, and not Joe.—Ever yours truly, HENRIETTA GRESHAM.'

'You see, Susie,' says Mrs Gresham, as she folds the letter, and stamps it, 'Dick will think I am taking a bonus for placing you, from my last sentence, and so he won't let out a word to your father on the subject. And when you get to Brum (Dick

has one of the Brum theatres for the season), you'll find your work all ready chalked out for you. He's the best fellow in the world, except his wife, and they'll put you up till you're settled. And now, my dear, you'll excuse the question, but how much money have you to start with?'

'Quite enough, dear Mrs Gresham. Philip gave me twenty pounds a few days before I left Lutonstowe, and the best part of my wardrobe has followed me.'

'And you're sure you're going to do what will be best for your happiness?' adds her step-mother.

At that question Susie begins to cry. Poor, wayward, childish heart! In reality she has not the least idea *what* will be best for her happiness. All she is conscious of is, that she carries a burden about with her that seems too heavy to bear, and that she hopes in some miraculous manner to get rid of it by rushing away from the sight and sound and scene of her trouble. At the girl's distress, the wound in Mrs

Gresham's middle-aged, but not hardened heart, opens and bleeds afresh.

'Poor darling!' she says, as she places her hand tenderly upon Susie's bowed head. 'I can understand exactly what you're feeling. I've gone through it all myself, Susie—the suspense, the sickening doubts and fears, the awful, paralysing reality. And yet, when I knew the worst, and knew it for a certainty, I still clung to the hope that I had been mistaken, and it might all turn out to be a dream. *My* life never came right, Susie—not with *him* —but yours will, my dear. I am sure of that. So, take courage, and do your work bravely, and you will have your reward.'

'I cannot believe it,' says Susie, weeping. 'I am so young and foolish and inexperienced, you see, and if Philip cannot love me for these things, there is nothing left. *She* was older, and, I suppose, she was cleverer, and what he thinks more beautiful, so how can I expect to win his thoughts from her?'

'Perhaps this second journey into the

wide world will make you cleverer, more experienced, my dear,' replies Mrs Gresham. 'No one can tell how our fates are worked round to their proper end. But we see the unlikeliest things take place every day, without being astonished at them. Why shouldn't Lord Luton's mind change—if you think it requires changing—towards you?'

'Perhaps,' replies Susie, drying her eyes. 'Yet I have no hope of it. If she were *dead*, it would be different, but *living*, and bold enough to seek him out; what chance have I against her?'

'Well, my dear, I'll answer that question a twelvemonth hence; and she may be dead then—who knows? There's plenty of black cards lying round her queen, poor thing! and it seems to me she wants almost as much pity as yourself.'

'Oh, no!' cries Susie; 'for she never *loved* him. What woman could love a man and treat him as she has done? But I thank you, dear, for the comfort you have given me, and I shall think of it when I am far away.'

She says good-bye to her father on the following morning, without the slightest hint of where she is going; and he sees her drive off to the station, in the full belief that she is bound for Lutonstowe. Then comes the interview, already related, between himself and Lord Luton, in which he assures Philip that his wife has returned home. And when, later on, he hears that she has not done so, he is exceedingly annoyed at his daughter's obstinacy and folly, but never believes for a moment that she has come to any harm. Mrs Gresham keeps her own share in the transaction a religious secret, yet her husband makes up his mind that Susie is on the stage somewhere.

'The provoking jade!' he says, angrily; 'to give us all this trouble, when she had everything that she can possibly have desired. Fancy! leaving a place like Lutonstowe, and a house in Cavendish Square, and all that money and luxury, to go back to the boards! Well, I suppose it's in the blood. Her mother was a

born actress, and the girl takes after her. I don't believe my Bessie would have given up the stage for all the lords in the land; and Susie's the moral of her. Well, well! it's no good crying over spilt milk. I hear Lord Luton spends his time in going to all the theatres in England, so I suppose he'll find her in time. She'll turn up, Henrietta, never fear. She's too pretty to keep in the back row all her life. Besides, she'll get sick of it before long, and come sneaking back to us. Don't you think so?'

'I am *sure* of it, Joe—so sure, that it never troubles me for a minute,' replies his wife, who has received a letter from Susie that very morning.

And so time goes on, bringing the world its usual allowance of heartaches and spasmodic pleasures; and no one (except Mrs Gresham) guesses that the Miss Mary Lester, of whom the Scottish critics speak in such warm terms of praise, is no other than the wife of Lord Luton of Lutonstowe.

CHAPTER IV.

ABBY, THE DRESSER.

FATE is a much stronger and more important element in our lives than we give it credit for. It is Susie's fate to appear before Mr Richard Carleton, lessee of half-a-dozen theatres in England and Scotland, at the moment when he most needs her services; or rather, the letter from Mrs Gresham that precedes the advent of Miss Mary Lester puts him in the best of tempers.

'Look, Kate,' he says, as he joins his wife at the breakfast-table, 'here's the devil's own luck! Didn't I tell you some-

thing would turn up for Glasgow? I'm always right! I believe I'm a prophet! Here's a letter from dear old Jarrod, to say she's going to send me one of her pupils this very day; and if I can't place her at Stockport or Wintermorden, I'm to send her over the border. She'll be just the thing for Haleybury. I'll wire him at once, and pack her off by the night mail.'

'But you always jump at conclusions so hastily,' replies Mrs Carleton, holding out her hand for the letter. 'How can you be sure she'll suit you? Mr Haleybury expressly said he must have a *pretty* girl—the Glasgow audiences are so particular—so you had much better not wire him until you've seen her. And she has had no experience either, except in burlesque.'

'Don't you croak, old woman! Mary Lester will turn out a *rara avis*, see if she don't! Do you suppose Henrietta Jarrod knows me so little as to send me some gawky girl, with cross eyes, who can't walk the stage? If Miss Lester wasn't something out of the common, she would

have waited to get my answer before she despatched her to Birmingham. So, have a good dinner to welcome her with, and I'll see after the rest of the business.'

'Don't send the telegram, at least until you've seen the young lady,' remonstrates Mrs Carleton, and so far her enthusiastic husband condescends to take her advice. But it is despatched half-an-hour after Susie enters the house.

The worthy couple are both enchanted with the new-comer. Her lovely features, liquid eyes, and the elegance of her style and figure, take them completely by storm. Her rich dress, too, signifies her ability to shine in a way that is very important on the modern stage, and the manager decides off-hand that, if her talent comes up in any degree to her personal appearance, he will have secured a treasure.

Susie is tired with the excitement and fatigue she has gone through since leaving Bath, but she evinces no disinclination to travel to Glasgow that night — on the contrary, she hails Mr Carleton's pro-

posal with alacrity, believing that the farther she gets away from the scene of her trouble, the sooner she will forget it. The good manager and herself are not long in coming to terms with respect to her salary and other arrangements, and after spending the day in Birmingham, Susie finds herself in the Scotch express, bound for the Royal Thistledown Theatre, at Glasgow.

It seems all very wonderful to her, as she sits in the semi-darkness, with a copy of her part in her hand, and thinks over the events of the day. Yesterday she did not know what was to become of her, and to-night she is speeding at the rate of sixty miles an hour to the north, engaged at a salary of three pounds a-week to play the juvenile lead at one of the best theatres in Glasgow. Yesterday she was Lady Luton, afraid lest every train might bring her husband to Bath to order her to return home again; to-day she is Mary Lester, on her way to a new life and new scenes, and not a soul to know who she is, nor

where she goes, except her good old step-mother.

Susie feels a certain amount of relief at having gained her object, but it is uncertain if she is any the happier for the victory. Philip will never find her in Glasgow—of that she feels sure; he will never connect the name of the new actress, even if it should reach his ears, with that of his runaway wife—of the second wife that has run away from him. As Susie remembers this, a shudder runs through her frame. She has not looked on her own flight in that light before. How will Philip regard it? Will he not only be angry, but *ashamed?* Will her behaviour bring the blush of dishonour a second time upon his brow? Will it add a second sprinkling of frost upon his thick brown hair?—or will he be glad of the release it affords him? Will he say contemptuously that it was only what he might have expected, for having raised a beggar from the stage to sit by his side in Lutonstowe, and bear his name? And will he take

the first opportunity that chance affords him to take that other woman back into his house and his arms, and give her the affection which she has forfeited by the rupture of every law, human and divine?

As Susie ponders thus, and hears again in fancy the cry of pain with which Lord Luton pronounced the name of '*Magdalena*,' and left her, half-fainting with fright, to rush after her detested rival, all her native pride (and she has a considerable amount of it) rushes to her assistance, and she weeps hot, angry tears of resentment beneath the shelter of her veil. It is hard enough, she thinks, to know that Philip's tenderest memories linger round the days when Magdalena was his wife; but it is a thousand times harder—it is a bitter insult—that he should hear that she has had the audacity to enter his house, and the presence of the woman he has placed in her stead, and not resent it as an outrage on his affections and his honour.

When Susie arrives in Glasgow in the early morning, she is harassed and worn-

out by her conflicting thoughts, but she is more sure than ever that she has done the best thing for herself, by returning to the profession she loves. Mr Haleybury, who is the acting manager for Mr Carleton's company in Glasgow, is as charmed with the *débutante's* appearance as he had been led to expect. Beauty is the best passport in this world, and worth all the other natural gifts put together. Those only despise it who do not possess it, and it is a mean, narrow, and inartistic mind that affects to depreciate it. It is one of God's best gifts to man—the gift which He wears Himself—which He has given to His angels—and with which He has decorated the highest heavens. Beauty is not always Goodness; but it is typical of Good, and, therefore, to be valued and admired for its own sake, though not so much as the Goodness which ought to animate it.

Susie is both beautiful and good, which is the reason her sweet face holds so mystical a charm for the beholders. It was this

lovely blending of limpid eyes and long curled lashes, with a childlike expression of trust in them—of a fair, open brow, that looked as though it could not know deceit—of a curved and winning mouth with rose-leaf lips, that bore no trace of sensuality or greed, that had so enchained Lord Luton's fancy on the occasion of his first introduction to the girl he had made his wife. And it is this look of earnest, truthful innocence which beams in Susie's face (and which *is* as well as *seems*) that strikes Mr Haleybury now as being the sweetest expression he has ever met upon a woman's features. The experience of her married life, too, has vastly improved the girl in many ways. She looks more thoughtful and less childish than she did of old; her manners are more dignified, and she has acquired the ease of speech and motion which is only to be learned in a drawing-room. She is, in fact, so superior to the majority of young ladies, either on or off the boards, that the Glasgow manager begins to question with himself whether it would not be

advisable to make her appearance an especial feature in his bills. Common sense, however, comes opportunely to his aid, and he decides not to do anything noticeable until he has seen his new paragon act. In this particular, however, Susie (or Miss Mary Lester, as she is called) soon shows that she has inherited all her mother's capacity. The *rôle* assigned her is not a difficult one, and she soon masters it.

The boards of the Royal Thistledown Theatre are occupied at this moment by a lady who appeals to the public by her talent rather than her youth or beauty. She is a remarkable woman, who did not discover her genius for the stage till late in life, and then, by dint of extraordinary energy, brought it to bear upon the profession, aided by the experience and *savoir-faire* which middle age had given her, and which combined make her so extraordinary an actress, that the public forgive every other deficiency. Her name is Olivia Hunter, and she is appearing night after

night in such heavy melo-dramatic parts as best suited her age and *physique.* Susie has been engaged to play the juveniles with her, parts purposely made subservient to those of Miss Hunter, but requiring the youth and beauty which she does not possess. Olivia Hunter is, in fact, a really clever woman. She is not handsome, and she is past her *première jeunesse,* and she not only knows the fact, but allows it. She depends entirely on her talent for drawing an audience, and therefore, instead of resenting Susie's personal attractions, she welcomes them as cordially as the manager does.

'You are lovely, child,' she says, the first day they rehearse together; 'and if you will take the hints I give you, you will make a very good little actress. But you want experience, and I don't think you've played in drama before.'

'No, I have not,' replies Susie; 'this is only my second engagement, and the first was for farce and burlesque.'

'*Burlesque!*' cries Miss Hunter, shrugging

her shoulders. 'My dear, you give me the shivers. Yes; I know it's very fashionable, and I daresay you looked very handsome with next to nothing on, but it's a sacrilege that you should have attempted it. Now, if you'll study hard, and take my advice, I may make your fortune. I'm going out with my own company to New York next autumn, and if we get on together, I'll take you with me. Should you like that?'

'Very much,' says Susie (yet she cannot help remembering at the same time that Mrs Gresham said there was no crossing the seas 'in her cards'); 'and you must not think I liked burlesque, Miss Hunter. I only did it because—because it came in my way; but it was all very silly, I thought, and there was no acting in it.'

'No one likes it,' replies Miss Hunter, 'except those who can't do anything else, and a few foolish girls who think they'll catch the fancy of some of the swells in the stalls, and perhaps marry them. As if a girl off the burlesque stage wouldn't be about the last woman in the world a

gentleman would marry. Why, it's sickening even to think of them in private life. And a man could never fully trust nor respect a wife whom he had seen dancing about, half clothed, to amuse an audience of roughs—how could he?'

'I suppose not,' says Susie, with a sinking heart, for she wonders what Philip is thinking about her at that very moment, and if he regrets he ever married 'a girl from the burlesque stage.' 'But I shall never play in burlesque again, Miss Hunter; I have decided that.'

'I hope not, indeed,' rejoins the 'star,' 'for you have refinement as well as good looks, and if you develop talent, you may live to reach the highest rung of the ladder.'

And as the days go on, Susie seems to justify Olivia Hunter's ambition for her. She falls easily and gracefully into the parts allotted to her, and walks the stage as naturally as if she had been at Lutonstowe. The audience of the Royal Thistledown soon came to know and appreciate

the sweet face and winning manners of Miss Mary Lester, and her appearance is nightly greeted with a burst of applause. So she grows to her work again, and her real love and aptitude for the profession, make her go in for it heart and soul; and if a wild longing to rush back to England, and see her father and Philip, sometimes rises in her mind, she crushes it back again with a thought of Magdalena, and goes on with the business she has in hand. There is much of novelty too in her new life to distract her thoughts from the past. The management of the Royal Thistledown Theatre is very different from that of her father's company. A travelling company, that only remains a week or a fortnight in a place, plays one piece night after night, *ad nauseam* to the hapless performers, who become at last so utterly sick of repeating the same words and singing the same notes, that sometimes they actually forget them (paradoxical as it may sound), because they know them too well.

After the first excitement, therefore, of

rehearsing and producing a new comedy or burlesque is over, there is nothing more to be done (for the ladies at least), than to try and make fresh conquests in each town they visit. But in Glasgow, with a stock company and a discriminative audience, who visit the theatre almost every night, fresh pieces are in constant course of rehearsal and production, and the members spend all their days, as well as their nights, in the theatre. To stand about a stage, rehearsing from ten till four, and then, after a hurried meal, to return there again and play till eleven or twelve at night, does not leave one much leisure for brooding over sad thoughts of any kind.

And Susie finds the benefit of this constant exertion of mind and body. When she is not at the theatre she is learning new parts, or altering her dresses to suit them, and when she lies down to sleep at night, she is so exhausted that she seldom wakes till morning. But she is faithful to the love that grows with the pain of absence and suspicion. Many a time her

sweet eyes close in slumber whilst the tears are still undried upon her cheeks, and the name of 'Philip' lingers on her lips. Whenever she has a moment for her private thoughts, they fly to him, but the remembrance is mixed with so much pain, that she will turn to study, or to needlework, or anything that has the power to dispel them. She lives by herself. She is so much afraid that in some unguarded moment she may betray her secret, that she dares not accept the offers that come to her from every side to share the rooms of her fellow artists. And so she is lonelier, poor child, than she need have been.

She occupies two rooms of a flat (most of the houses in Glasgow are built in flats), and when she has shut herself in at night, and not a footfall even is to be heard on the general stone staircase outside, she feels so lonely and forsaken that her day usually ends in a burst of tears. But the letters she receives from her stepmother—few and far between—(for Mrs Gresham is not given to writing, except on

business) relieve her mind with regard to the welfare of those she has left behind her, and strengthen her in her resolve to pursue the path she has chalked out for herself. Her father (she hears) is well, and hearty, and not concerning himself a whit as to her mysterious disappearance. He speaks of her sometimes, and always with affection; says she is a fool for not knowing when she was well off; but that he is convinced she is on the stage somewhere, under an assumed name, and he supposes it's in the blood, and she takes to the boards like a fish to water.

'Meanwhile,' writes Mrs Gresham, 'he is quite happy, and almost proud at times, it would seem, to think that his daughter should have thrown up all the good things of this life, to stick to "the finest profession in the world."'

Of Lord Luton her step-mother can tell her little, except that her father had come across his name, some weeks back, in a society paper, which announced him to be in Paris.

'In *Paris!*' thinks Susie, with a curled lip; 'and, with *her*, of course. He is ashamed (naturally so), to let his English friends know of his wicked infatuation, and so he has gone abroad, where he can extend to her the forgiveness he has asserted himself ready and willing to do, without offending public decency. Oh, why did he ever marry me? How bitterly unjust it was to take me away from my father, to be made a laughing-stock of to the world! But *no!*' drawing herself up; 'the world shall *never* laugh at me, at all events to my face. It may shrug its shoulders, and pity poor silly Lady Luton, who fancied that a girl "off the burlesque stage" could ever satisfactorily fill the position of a peer's wife; but I will make it acknowledge yet that Mary Lester is a woman to be admired—if not envied, by the brainless fashionables who have not a particle of her talent. Yes! I have thrown myself away (I see that now) on the first man who asked me—but marriage is not the end of all things, and I will make a name

for myself that shall throw that of Lady Luton in the shade!'

So the girl flies to ambition (as many a talented woman has done before her) to heal the stings of a disappointed love. Miss Hunter takes an increasing interest in Susie as the time goes on, and through that lady's influence she is kept from much that might otherwise deteriorate her. She shares her dressing-room at the theatre, and only leaves it to pass on the stage, so that after the lapse of some months she is almost as ignorant of the names and appearance of the subordinate members of the company as she was on first joining them.

A courteous bow is all that is exchanged between them (for though she keeps her own counsel, Susie cannot forget that she is Lord Luton's wife), and yet she bows with so sweet and sympathetic a smile, that her fellow artists cannot vote her either proud or upstart. But they *do* think one thing, that Miss Mary Lester must have known some great trouble; for off the stage

her voice is never heard raised in girlish laughter, nor her beautiful face seen wreathed in smiles.

Olivia Hunter likes her all the better for her reticence and melancholy. She hates giggling girls, and declares their heads rattle because there is nothing in them. She may or may not have known trouble herself (though it is scarcely likely she should arrive at middle age without it), but she maintains a lofty and unapproachable demeanour on purpose, and permits of no familiarity from any member of the company, from the manager downwards. Even the stage-carpenters, and scene-shifters, those autocrats of the boards, make way for her as if she were a queen; and the dressers, and such small cattle, address her in a humble tone, as if they could not be insolent if they tried.

Miss Hunter is most particular with regard to the appointments of her dressing-room, and as a rule has her own maid to attend her at the theatre, and do everything she may require.

But one day this maid falls sick (as maids have a habit of doing sometimes, however inconvenient it may be to their employers), and Miss Hunter (greatly against her inclination) is compelled to have recourse to one of the dressers of the theatre. Susie offers to do all she can for the star, but the star is too considerate to accept her services.

'No, no, my dear!' she says, 'you will have more than enough to do to look after yourself. Besides, your dresses must be laced, and I couldn't see to do it by gas-light to save my life. It is imperative we have a dresser. Tell the wardrobe woman to send us one down from the general dressing-room; and mind she has clean hands, please.'

Susie delivers the message, and a few minutes afterwards a tap is heard at Miss Hunter's door.

'Come in,' cries the star, and then as her command is complied with, she glances at the stranger, and demands sharply, 'Are you the dresser?'

'Yes,' replies the woman, in a subdued voice.

Miss Hunter is about to ask her if that is the way she addresses a lady, but a second glance deters her. There is nothing insolent nor even cool about the dresser's manner. She is a young woman of perhaps five or six-and-twenty, very poorly clad, and with her hair (which is thickly streaked with grey) thrust back under a black bonnet of the fashion of several years ago. She is painfully thin, with a white face and a hacking cough that tells of consumption, or some other mischief to the lungs. Susie looks up at her only once, and applies herself to the task of 'making up' again; but Miss Hunter, after having decided not to rebuke her want of deference, proceeds to tell her what is required. She has torn a flounce off her train the night before, and it must be sewn on again.

'What is your name?' she continues.

'Abigail. They call me "Abby" in the other dressing-room,' replies the dresser.

'Oh, very well. Have you your needle and thread with you, Abby?'

'I can fetch it in a moment,' the woman replies, as she leaves the room.

'What an extraordinary person,' remarks Miss Hunter. 'She never says "Madam," and yet I don't think she means to be rude; she is so quiet.'

'She looks awfully ill,' says Susie. 'Did you hear her cough?'

'Yes; she is not much fitter to be out in the evening air than Harris; but these poor dressers can't afford to shirk their work. They seldom get more than three or four shillings a-week.'

'How can they live on it?' asks Susie.

'They depend chiefly on what the ladies give them. Most pay a shilling or two a-week, according to their salary, to the dresser. And they earn it, too, when they do their work. There's always something amiss in a woman's wardrobe.'

Here the dresser re-enters the room, and Susie regards her with increased interest. Abby goes close to the gas lamp

to pursue her sewing, and Susie remarks what beautifully small and well-shaped hands she has, and how fragile they appear, as if you could see through them. It is difficult to resist the influence that makes us look up at the eyes that are steadfastly regarding us. Abby feels this influence, and turns her glance full upon Susie's face. Her usual expression is mournful in the extreme—the look of a beaten dog or a castaway; but as she meets the pitying eyes of the fairer and younger and, as she thinks, the more prosperous woman, the dresser frowns, and turns hastily away. It is evident that she is proud, and disdains any commiseration of her impoverished state.

Perhaps she has been better off, thinks warm-hearted, loving Susie, and brought down to this humble condition by sickness and misfortune, and on the instant she wishes she could do something for her. There is an attraction for her in this miserable and attenuated creature, who is patiently stitching at Miss Hunter's

robe, for which she cannot account, and when the great actress presently puts the very usual question,—

'Are your hands clean, Abby?' Susie has answered, 'I am *sure* they are!' before the dresser has had time to reply.

At this unexpected readiness to stand sponsor for her cleanliness, on the part of the young lady, whom she has often watched with curious interest upon the stage, the woman raises a grateful glance to Susie's face, but it is like a flash of lightning, gone as soon as recognised, and all she does is to answer quietly Miss Hunter's question.

'My hands are usually clean, but I will wash them again if you are afraid.'

'I would rather you did,' says Olivia Hunter carelessly. 'These pale satins are so apt to soil.'

The dresser walks up to the basin, and washes her hands without a word, but Susie, who can watch the reflection of her face in the mirror, sees that an angry spot

of red flames up into her pale cheek the while, and that she evidently considers the caution to be an unnecessary indignity. Miss Hunter, being dressed, walks off into the green-room to await the rising of the curtain, and it is Susie's turn to be attended to.

'Shall I wash my hands again before I lace *your* dress, Miss Lester?' demands Abby, in a subdued voice.

Susie laughs. Her laugh, sweet and silvery as it is, seems to go through the dresser, who palpably shivers at the sound.

'No, Abby! I really don't think that can be necessary, but you must be careful of my dress lace, please, as I am afraid it is rather worn.'

'I will be as careful as possible,' says Abby, in reply; 'but I do not think myself that it will last you many more evenings. It is nearly frayed through in the middle. I am quite sorry these laced dresses have come in again. They are twice as troublesome when you have to change often.'

'Have you been a dresser long, Abby?'

'Why do you ask me, Miss Lester?'

'Because laced dresses have not been in fashion since I was grown up. I remember them about the time I was fourteen, and how I teased an old aunt of mine with whom I lived to let me have one. She was horrified at the very idea, and said girls would be wearing their stays outside their dresses next. Poor old Auntie Susan!'

'You were brought up by an aunt, Miss Lester?' says the dresser interrogatively.

'Yes, I was,' replies Susie, suddenly remembering herself; 'but please make haste. The overture is nearly over.'

She cannot understand why the dresser, who appeared so silent in the presence of Miss Hunter, should have any interest in putting such a question to her, and almost feels as if she had betrayed a clue to her identity. So she says no more until the call-boy summons her to the stage, when

she runs away without another look at Abby. The woman remains in the dressing-room, however, all the evening, humbly seated on a chair near the door, ready to do anything the ladies may require; and Susie feels, whenever she is off the stage, as if Abby's dark, melancholy eyes were following her everywhere. She keeps close to her elbow too, and is almost officious in helping her to change her dress, and asking what she can do for her.

'Is there nothing to be done to your dresses, Miss Lester? No frills or lace to be tacked in, nor spots of grease to be taken out?'

'I think not, thank you, Abby. My dresses are all new and fresh as yet. I don't think I shall want any assistance, in that way, till Harris comes back again.

Abby sighs.

'I wish I was your private dresser, Miss Lester, and had the charge of your things. It would be such a pleasure to me to look after them.'

'Would it?' says Susie, turning round in her surprise. 'Why?'

A faint colour tinges the dresser's pale cheeks.

'Oh! I don't know! Because you are soft spoken and a lady, I suppose. It is not everyone who is so—and work is hard enough, even with those advantages.'

'I think you are of better birth yourself than your position indicates, Abby. It strikes me you have seen better days. Is it not so?'

'What do you call better days, Miss Lester?'

'Happier and richer ones.'

'Yes! that may easily be true; but I suppose the days of all of us are mostly what we make them for ourselves?'

'Oh, no!' cries Susie impulsively; 'the cruelty or kindness of others may make or mar our days for us! Mine'—but there she stops short, with a vivid blush upon her cheek. The dresser regards her steadfastly.

'I don't suppose you're much happier

than the rest of the world, Miss Lester,' she says; 'no one is really happy. But you are pure and good, and that ought to make you content.'

'We can all be *that!*' replies Susie softly.

Abby heaves a deep sigh, and busies herself with the contents of Miss Lester's basket. They are alone in the dressing-room, Miss Hunter having an act of the drama nearly to herself, and Susie feels half nervous, wondering what is to come next. What *does* come startles her more than anything that has gone before. Abby raises her head from the basket, with this remarkable question,—

'Were you ever in a cathedral town, Miss Lester?'

Susie stares at her as if she had gone demented.

'What an extraordinary thing to ask me, Abby! What on earth put it into your head?'

The woman's dark eyes are fixed upon her face, without either fear or shame.

'But *were* you?' she importunes.

'How can it interest you to know?'

'Not much, perhaps. But yours is a face not easily forgotten, and I fancy I have seen you before.'

'I am *sure* you have not,' replies Susie, in rather an offended tone, as she turns to the glass again. 'You are utterly mistaken. I never set eyes upon you before this evening.'

'Don't be angry,' says the dresser earnestly; 'I did not mean to vex you. Even if we *had* met, you would hardly be likely to recognise me again.'

Susie's warm heart reproaches her for having spoken harshly to so forlorn a creature. She turns again to Abby, saying, 'I am not angry; I was only surprised,' and sees, to her astonishment, that the dresser's eyes are full of tears. As she joins Miss Hunter in the green-room, she whispers to her that she thinks their new attendant must be out of her mind.

'She has been rambling on in such an extraordinary manner, asking me who

brought me up, and if I had ever seen a cathedral, that I got half afraid of staying alone with her. I am sure she is mad or drunk.'

Miss Hunter laughs at her *protégée's* fears.

'Nonsense, Mary. If you were as well used to dressers as I am, you would know that they all talk your head off, if you will allow it. Some ladies like that kind of senseless gossip. *I don't;* so I always put them in their place at once, and never address them except on matters of business. These women who hang about theatres are the greatest scandal-mongers in the world, and delight to carry stories from one room to the other. She was only trying to "pump" you, in order to satisfy the curiosity of the general dressing-room as soon as she returns to it.'

'I think it is most unladylike,' cries Susie, with a heightened colour, 'for people to try and find out anything more than their neighbours choose to tell them. I don't want to know the private history

of every girl that plays on the stage with me. Why should they try to find out mine?'

'Simply because you don't tell it, my dear,' replies Miss Hunter, laughing. 'But you may rest assured that they will pick up every crumb you let fall in the dressing-room, whilst poor Harris is *hors de combat.* But come, Mary, we were "called" a minute ago. It is time we were at the wings.'

And the two ladies, who are filling the parts of a mother and daughter, walk on the stage together.

CHAPTER V.

SUSIE AND LENA MEET AGAIN.

BUT though Olivia Hunter's caution causes Susie to be very silent for the remainder of the evening, and she leaves the dressing-room to go home, without a farewell look or word for the poor dresser who has offended her, she cannot as easily dismiss the memory of what has passed from her mind. There is something in Abby that powerfully attracts her.

For many hours she lies awake, with the sound of her plaintive voice in her ears, and the gaze of her dark, mournful eyes fixed upon her own. Once even, on

waking from a short sleep, she fancies she sees the dresser standing at her bedside, and gazing sadly at her. She becomes nervous and alarmed by her own strange fancies. Her thoughts go wandering back to olden days, and she wonders what made Abby ask her if she had ever been in a cathedral town, or fancy that she had seen her face before. Is it possible that the dresser is right, and that this is not the first time they have encountered each other? But if so, *where* can it have been, and under what circumstances? What was Abby at that time?—a servant, a dresser, or a super at some theatre? It is quite impossible for Susie to remember, considering the number of places she has visited and the people she has seen. But of one thing she is sure,—if she has ever seen Abby's face before, she does not recognise it. Yet it is strange how her eyes haunt her with their sad, fixed gaze, and how, when Susie tries to analyse the dresser's features and recall her mouth and nose and figure, her mind will go wander-

ing back to those eyes, that seem to pierce her through and through.

The fact of her old aunt and the cathedral town having been mentioned, send Susie's thoughts back to the days of her childhood, and the happy, peaceful time she spent in Malisbury. And when, at last, wearied out with conjecture and surprise, she falls asleep, her unchained spirit flies back to the first home she knew, and she dreams that she is back in the cathedral cloisters, playing with little Lena Anstey, the dean's daughter. What fun they used to have in those dear old childish days, before Nemesis, in the twin shapes of Miss Prescott and the dean, appeared to separate them!

Susie slumbers then in a fitful, restless way, mixing up Lena and Philip and the dean and the dresser in her dreams in an inexplicable manner, until the sun streams in at her lonely chamber again and it is time to rise and breakfast.

But all through the day her fantastic dream seems to pursue her waking hours,

until she finds herself halting in the midst of business to give a sigh to the days when she had known neither care nor sorrow. When she enters the dressing-room that evening, she finds Abby already in attendance. There is certainly something strange about the woman. She rises as Susie enters the room, but it is the action of one lady rising to greet another, and not of a dependant to show deference to a superior. Susie, however, hardly notices what she does. Miss Hunter's warning is still ringing in her ears, and she passes the dresser with a hasty 'Good evening,' and commences to lay out the articles she requires for the night.

'You will permit me to do that for you, won't you, Miss Lester?' says Abby, in a low voice, as she approaches the table. 'I should have done it before you came, only I was not sure if you would approve of my touching your things.'

'I am quite able to do it for myself,' says Susie curtly.

'You will deprive me of so great a

pleasure if you refuse,' replies the woman, with a sound in her voice as if she were about to shed tears.

Miss Hunter has not yet arrived, and Susie cannot restrain herself. She veers round upon the dresser, with a gesture that has as much of annoyance as surprise in it.

'What do you mean by talking to me in this nonsensical manner?' she demands, almost sharply. 'What possible pleasure can it give you to unpack my rouge pots? Do you pay these fulsome compliments to everybody you attend?—for I don't appreciate them.'

'I see you don't,' replies the dresser.

'I wish you'd leave them off, then. I hate flattery; I like people to be honest and true.'

'And you think, then, that it is incompatible that I should like to be near you and serve you, and yet be honest and true?'

'I don't see how it can be otherwise,' returns Susie bluntly, 'considering we never met till yesterday. However, you can lay out my things if you like, for Miss Hunter will be here directly.'

The woman makes no answer to her remark, but proceeds to fulfil the duties of her position, though every now and then she casts a look at Susie, which makes the girl so uncomfortable as almost to distract her thoughts from the work she has in hand. Miss Hunter, however, soon appears, sharp, practical, and energetic; and in her presence Abby becomes dumb.

'Harris is no better,' she says, as she greets Susie, 'so I suppose we shall have to put up with the dresser for another night or two. The doctor is afraid of bronchitis—such a nuisance! and just when she was in the midst of retrimming that blue satin dress for me. I suppose I shall have to put it out. I *must* have it next week. Do you take in dressmaking, dresser?' she adds, rather brusquely, to Abby, who is attending upon her at the time.

'No, I was not brought up to it,' replies the woman, in a curt and almost uncourteous tone of voice.

'To nothing half so respectable, I expect,' says Miss Hunter roughly.

She does not mean to insult Abby, but she is in the habit of speaking *brusquely* to all her inferiors, and the dresser's manner has offended her; so she continues without reserve to Susie,—

'I shall be heartily glad when Harris is able to wait upon us again, my dear; I hate having strangers about me—I always did; and no one but a professed lady's-maid knows how to manage modern dresses. They told me my trains looked anyhow last night.'

'I think they were just the same as usual; I observed no difference,' replies Susie, who has seen poor Abby flush up under the sarcasm, and is anxious to soothe her wounded feelings. But her good intentions have apparently but little effect; for after she and Miss Hunter have entered the green-room, she misses her handkerchief, and returning to the dressing-room to fetch it, finds Abby cast upon the ground, with her head leaning on a chair, dissolved in tears. There is such an *abandon* of grief in the poor creature's

attitude, such a wail in the sound of her voice, that all Susie's compassionate feelings rise to the surface at the sight of her.

'My poor girl!' she exclaims, 'what *is* the matter? Are you ill? or has anything occurred to upset you?'

Abby raises her wet eyes imploringly. Her hair has partly fallen over her face; and she startles Susie like the sudden remembrance of a forgotten dream.

'Don't give way like this,' she continues, kindly. 'If you are ill, let me send for something for you.'

The woman clutches at her silken dress, and kisses it feverishly.

'No, no! I am not ill. I am only mad —*mad* sometimes to think of what I *was*, and what I *am!* Oh! it is hard to come down like this,—and when she speaks to me, it seems to bring it all back again.'

'Poor thing!' says Susie. 'And I have added to your pain—I know I have. Forgive me, Abby. I have known trouble, and ought to have learned more consideration.

'Don't blame yourself; you are an

angel, and far too good to me. There! go, go! It is your cue, and you must not get into a scrape for such as I.'

Susie goes to her own dressing-table, and pours out a glass of port wine from her little flask.

'Drink this,' she says to the dresser; 'it will help you to compose yourself. Don't let Miss Hunter see you in this state, or she might say unkind things. And now I *must* go, but I shall soon come back again.'

And as she leaves the room, Susie feels the impress of a burning kiss which the prostrate woman has left upon her hand. She is touched by the incident, but she is also vexed. She has kept herself aloof from all familiarity with the supers of the theatre hitherto, and she does not want to break through her rule for the sake of a dresser. And yet Abby seems to have 'wormed' her way into a certain intimacy without her consent, and to have made her feel interested in her against her will. What are this woman's antecedents to her?

Why should she care to know if she has seen 'better days,' or always filled the position she fills now? And yet Susie is conscious of a certain curiosity to find out all about her, and relieve her necessities, if it should be in her power. Her prostrate attitude, her scalding tears, her quiet and humiliated manner, haunt the girl through the different phases of the drama like an evil dream.

But when, on the conclusion of the first act, she re-enters the dressing-room with Miss Hunter, all traces of Abby's emotion have passed away. Her face is as pallid as before, her hair is straightened and tucked back under her bonnet, and she stands, silently and patiently, to receive her orders. The ladies are occupied talking to each other, and Susie can only give her a kindly nod in passing. Some part of the scenery has gone wrong, and Miss Hunter is loud in her denunciation of the person whose business it is to see that it is right.

'That man Jones must go,' she says;

'I shall speak about it to Haleybury to-morrow. This is the second time this week he has endangered our lives, and the piece. And a tombstone, of all things, to tumble down in the middle of the scene! No wonder someone in the gallery called out, "Who's your mason?"'

Susie is still too young to see anything but amusement in so absurd an accident, however much it may endanger the gravity of the audience.

'It was worse for me than you,' she says, 'for I was sitting on it; and when it went back, I thought I should have died. In the midst of Mr Archer's pathetic appeal, too! I'd have given anything to be able to run off the stage.'

'It's all very well for you to laugh, Mary, but it's a very serious thing. Suppose it had fallen forward instead of backward, it might have hurt us all.'

'But when you are swearing eternal fidelity by the ashes of your murdered wife, to be obliged to pick up her tombstone and set it straight again, *is*

very funny, you know,' replies Susie impulsively. 'It set me thinking of the dear old ponderous tombstones at Malisbury, that a regiment of cavalry couldn't have displaced.'

'Malisbury!' repeats Miss Hunter; 'have you ever been at Malisbury?'

The dresser pricks up her ears for the answer.

'Yes,' says Susie, though hesitatingly.

'Such a dear old town,' continues her friend; 'and such lovely scenery! I stayed a fortnight there once with some relatives, and enjoyed myself immensely. It's the most beautiful cathedral in England I believe.'

'Yes! it is *very* beautiful,' says Susie, with a sigh.

'Were you there long, Mary?'

'All my childhood! I was brought up there,' replies Susie, who has decided that the admission cannot prove any clue to her present position.

'You must know it well, then.'

'Every inch of the town. I was dream-

ing of it last night. I dreamt I was back again in the cathedral cloisters playing with a child companion—whom I loved very dearly. Oh, dear! oh, dear! How long ago it seems, and I am only nineteen.'

She stretches herself in a half-lazy, half-listless manner as she speaks, and throws her lovely hazel eyes, as clear and innocent as when she was a child, upwards. As they come down to earth again, their expression changes to one of alarm. The dark orbs of the dresser are fixed upon her in a weird, mysterious gaze, that seems to draw her very soul out of her bosom, fascinated though appalled.

'Abby! what *is* the matter?' she almost screams; 'you are ill again; you are going to faint!'

But the woman straightens herself with wonderful agility, and has resumed her normal expression before Miss Hunter's eyes have turned her way.

'No! I am not ill, Miss Lester, nor am I going to faint, thank you. I was only thinking,' she says, as she stoops down and

occupies herself by picking up an imaginary pin from the floor.

'My dear, you are quite right,' whispers Miss Hunter to Susie, as they go on the stage again; 'that woman *is* either mad or drunk. If Harris is not well enough to come to the theatre to-morrow, I shall tell them to send us somebody else. I can't stand her any longer.'

'No! don't do that,' replies Susie; 'for I have changed my opinion about her, and think that she is either very ill, or has experienced some great sorrow. I never saw such sad eyes in my life. I wonder if she is married.

'Do you think that would be sufficient to account for them?' asks her friend laughing. 'Then I shall accuse *you* of having a husband concealed somewhere, Mary, for, in repose, your eyes have the mournfulest expression possible.'

Susie tries to laugh off the notion as the most absurd that could have been suggested, but reddens to the tips of her ears nevertheless, and excites Olivia Hunter's

raillery to such a degree, that she dresses and hastens homewards with unnecessary speed as soon as the piece is concluded. As she quickly traverses the still crowded pavement, she feels some one touch her arm, and looking back, finds to her annoyance that she is followed by the dresser.

'What is it you want of me?' she demands, sharply. 'Did I leave anything behind?'

'No, Miss Lester, I think not,' replies the woman, in a fluttered voice; 'but I took the liberty of following you, to ask if I might accompany you home.'

'Accompany me home! What for?' echoes Susie.

'Only to see that you are not molested. You live in Sauchiehall Street, do you not? And the thoroughfare is crowded at this hour. I should feel so much more easy if I saw you safe into the house.'

'I cannot possibly understand,' says Susie, 'why you should take this interest in me; and, to speak frankly, I don't care about it. I have always been accustomed

to look after myself, and to go about alone, and I do not wish to put myself under an obligation to anybody, least of all a stranger.'

'I don't think I am such a stranger to you as you imagine, Miss Lester,' replies the dresser; 'and I'm sure you are too kind to be offended if I ask you a question. Did you know anyone of the name of Prescott in Malisbury?'

'Why! that was *my* name; at least, it was my aunt's name!' exclaims Susie, taken off her guard. 'And did you know her, Abby?'

'No, Miss Lester, I am not aware that I ever saw your aunt. But I knew *you*.'

'*You knew me?*'

'Yes! As little Susie Prescott, I knew you well, and I recognised you the first time I saw you on the stage. You have the same eyes, the same slender figure, the same curling chesnut hair. I could not mistake your identity, but I am not in the least surprised that you do not know

me again. The wonder would have been if you had.'

Susie's interest and curiosity are now thoroughly aroused. She turns and faces her companion, and scrutinises her features earnestly.

'I have *never* seen you before,' she asserts. 'I am *sure* of it. Besides, if I have, what were you then?'

'Very different from what I am now,' replies Abby bitterly. 'In a better position than you have ever been, or will ever be! Don't you remember Lena Anstey, the dean's daughter?'

'Of course I do. She was my dearest child friend. I have never forgotten her, and never shall. But what of her? Do you know Miss Anstey? Can you tell me where she is?'

'She is *here*, at your side,' replies the dresser. 'Susie, *I* am Lena Anstey.'

'*What?*' cries Susie. '*What?*'

They have turned into a quieter street by this time, and as the incredible assertion reaches her ear, she stops, and stands back

against the wall. She can hardly breathe, and her heart beats audibly. *This*—this shabby-looking creature in a black alpaca dress and a faded bonnet Lena Anstey, the heiress of the dean of Malisbury! Lena! whose dresses and playthings used to be the envy of her childish heart! Lena! who never appeared but in a silken frock and a laced pinafore tied up with ribbons! The dean's daughter sunk down to be a dresser in a theatre! It is *impossible!* It cannot be!

Susie is more than ever convinced that poor Abby is either drunk or mad.

'You don't believe me; I see you don't,' replies the woman sadly; 'and I suppose it is hardly to be expected that you should. But if I could tell you my miserable story, you would understand how it has all come about. Susie! I am indeed Lena, though it nearly kills me with shame to tell you so.'

'It *cannot* be,' gasped Susie; 'it is impossible! I must be dreaming. It cannot be!'

'What can I say to convince you of the truth?' moans Abby; 'and yet some things occurred at that time that were only known to you and me. Do you remember the kitten, Charlie, of which you were so fond, Susie, and the puppy which I killed in my rage, because it would follow you instead of me? Ah! I have sacrificed more important victims to my rage since then. I have killed my own respectability and my life's happiness.'

At the mention of the kitten and puppy, Susie's face undergoes a change. It retains all its sadness and surprise, but it loses its incredulity and horror.

'I see now,' she answers, slowly, 'you *must* be Lena. But how shall I ever understand the mystery of finding you here? Come to my house,' she continues, seizing the dresser's hand. 'Come and have supper with me, and tell me all. I shall not rest until I have heard your story.'

'But, Susie, stay a moment,' says Lena. 'Don't forget what I said. I am no longer

what the world calls "respectable." It is not fit that I should go home with you.'

'*Not fit*,' cries Susie, with her soft eyes filled with tears; 'not fit, when you are *Lena!* Oh! don't say that again! If you are in trouble, let me try to help you out of it. Remember how we loved each other in the olden days.'

'Let me follow you, then, since you are so good,' says Lena; 'I will not be seen walking by your side.'

But Susie takes her hand, the pretty, fragile, little hand she admired in the theatre, firmly in her own, and leads her, sobbing beneath her breath, to the house where she lives. Then they mount the stairs together — these two, that were so near, and are so widely separate—and Susie takes the woman who was her childish friend, into her own apartment, in which the supper is ready, awaiting her return. She locks the door, and turns up the lighted lamp, and seats the trembling Lena in a comfortable chair.

'Now, we are alone,' she says—'alone

and uninterrupted. But don't speak yet, Lena. Have a glass of wine, and let me give you some supper. You are weak and faint; you must eat and drink first, and then you shall tell me everything.'

'I cannot eat,' replies Lena, shuddering. 'I scarcely ever eat. Food seems to choke me. But I will take a glass of wine if you will give it me. I do not expect you will renew your offer when you hear what I have to tell you.'

'Don't think so badly of me, Lena. I don't care what you may have done, excepting for your own sake. I can think only of the old days when we cared for each other so much that we were never happy apart. And are you really—*really* Lena?'

'You may well doubt it,' says her companion bitterly. 'Look at my dress, Susie, it will hardly hold together; and I have worn this bonnet for the last two years. Do you remember what thick black hair I had? It has almost all fallen off, and what is left of it is grey. And to come down to be a servant, at the beck and call

of a dozen women, who might have been proud at one time to serve me. Oh, my God! I am indeed fallen!'

She puts up her thin hands to her face, and the tears trickle slowly through her fingers.

'And is there no one to support you, then, Lena?' demands Susie wistfully.

'No one! I have not a friend in the world.'

'Where is—you will forgive my asking you the question, dear—but where is the dean, your father?'

'He died six years ago, thank God!'

'But I thought you were an heiress, Lena—that you had a lot of money of your own. Everyone said so in Malisbury.'

'I fancy they talked a great deal in Malisbury of what they knew nothing. My father had no income but his stipend, which died with him. I inherited a sum of money at the death of my grandparents in Italy, but when I married, it became the property of my husband, and they—they wouldn't give it me back again.'

'*They!* Who are they?' demands Susie.

'The law, my dear. Don't you understand?'

'But why did you go to law, Lena?'

'Oh, Susie! you are as innocent as you were in Malisbury. Do you remember how shocked you were because I told fibs, and how you got me into a scrape with Mademoiselle by letting her know where I had hidden myself?'

'I am afraid I must have been a great simpleton,' says Susie.

'You were not, my dear. You were the sweetest, purest child that ever lived. Oh! how often I have thought of you and your pretty face since then! It has risen before my eyes in my darkest hours, as though to mock me with the thought of what I *might have been.* I was awfully fond of you, Susie. When my father parted us, and sent me away from Malisbury, I cried myself ill. And all through my life I have felt somehow as though we should meet again.'

'You could not have been fonder of me than I was of you, Lena. I didn't care to play with anyone for many months after we were separated, and I was always trying to hear news of you. But no one could tell me anything. Where did you go when you left the deanery?'

'I was sent to school at Brighton until my father's death, which occurred when I was seventeen. I am only four years older than you, Susie.'

'Only four years!' says Susie; 'only twenty-three! Oh, poor Lena, and you look thirty!'

'More like forty, I should think, my dear. However, that is not to the point. When my father died, I was sent to the care of my aunt, his sister, who lived in London, and there I met the man I married.'

'Was he nice, Lena? Did he love you?'

Lena groans, and rocks herself to and fro.

'*Nice!* Oh, my God! don't torture me with any questions concerning him.

It is enough that I loved him—loved him, Susie, in the mad, passionate way I loved the puppy whose brains I dashed out against the wall. I loved him, and I was insanely, absurdly jealous of him. I was jealous of everything he touched — of every one who crossed his path—of every word or look he gave to man, woman, or child. And he resented it, and then we came to quarrelling. I threw reproaches and bitter words at him, until I wearied out his love for me, and we became estranged. And I gnawed my heart out until I had my revenge. I sacrificed myself, in order to torture him. I threw away my whole happiness to mar his.'

'But why—*why*, if you loved him?'

'Don't ask me, Susie. Don't sit there with your eyes wide open, as if I had done something you could not understand. You must have heard of such things, if you are too good to practise them. I ran away from my husband. I left him, in my rage, for another man, and I have never seen nor heard of him since. Now, you know all.'

Susie understands perfectly. It is not the first time she has heard of such things. A vision of Philip's suffering from the same cause rises before her, and dyes her cheek in crimson. But all she says is,—

'Poor Lena! how terribly you must have suffered!'

'*Suffered!* You do not know—you can *never* know—one-tenth of the suffering I have passed through since that day. By one mad act I lost everything in the world, and here I am—a beggar and a servant, dependent on the lowest work for my support, and too ill to perform that properly. Have you noticed my cough, Susie? I had two attacks of pneumonia last Christmas, and the cough has never left me since. I know it is on my lungs, and I only hope it may soon carry me off. Oh, if I had only the courage to take my own life, how quickly I would be rid of the intolerable pain of living!'

'No, no, Lena! you mustn't think of that, still less speak of it! Surely something can be done to alleviate your poverty.

It is shameful that a gentleman's daughter should be brought down to such a position! Don't you think your aunt might do something for you, if you were to ask her?'

'Susie, you do not know my pride. I would sooner *die* than ask her!'

'But your husband?'

'He is *not* my husband,' cries Lena, wildly; 'though I never, *never* can forget that he has been so! Oh, Susie, he was so good, so generous, so kind! I was mad to leave him! I had everything that money could procure whilst I was with him, and now—now I have *nothing!* But don't suppose that I could stoop to beg of him, or let anyone else do so. I am nothing to him now. He has another wife by this time, and is prosperous and happy, and never gives a thought to me, as why should he, unless it be to curse the day we met! Oh, I know—I feel—he hates me! He would be glad to hear that I am ill and starving. He would say it serves me right. And yet, Susie, I love

him so much still, that sometimes I feel as if I could die happy if he would let me crawl to his feet and breathe out my last sigh in a kiss upon them. I dream of him every night. I dread to close my eyes, because it makes my waking such a misery. And I dream of him all day long. I picture him happy and loving with that other woman, and I would like to dash between their kisses and dig my nails into her throat and hold her down—*down*—until she died! Oh, that I could strangle her with my own hand! That I could strangle them both, and know that they could never look into each other's faces more!'

Lena's excitement has risen so terribly with the occasion, and she is working herself up into such a frenzy, that Susie becomes frightened, and rises from her chair.

'*Don't* speak like that, Lena,' she says; 'it is very wrong, and you will make yourself ill. Try to think more calmly of the past, dear, or don't think of it at all. Talk of something else. Where is the gentleman for whom you—you—left your hus-

band? Surely it is *his* business to support you now.'

'*Where is he?*' repeats Lena, with a sneer; 'the coward! He is just where he ought to be, broiling in the most unhealthy part of the East Indies, and I hope he may die and rot there. He was just the sort of cur that eats a man's bread, and steals his wife from him, and leaves her to starve, or to walk the streets, as chance may please. Sometimes, when I am at my worst, I say I *cannot* die till I have been revenged on him. But the story is known far and wide. He will find his best punishment in the contempt of his fellow-creatures.'

'How long is it since he left you?' says Susie.

'Three years. I was married at nineteen. I ran away at twenty, and it has taken three years to bring me down to this. Should you have thought it could be done so quickly, Susie?'

'Poor, poor Lena! you have indeed been unfortunate. But what made you come to Glasgow?'

'He—the cur!—left me in Edinburgh, with ten pounds in my pocket. He professed to be going to London to effect an exchange into another regiment, instead of which he had sailed with his own for Bombay, before I knew he intended deserting me. I was obliged to work, of course—I first became a dresser in Edinburgh, through the recommendation of my landlady, and then I was drafted with a travelling company down here, which must have been fate, since I have met you again. And now, Susie, you know everything, and don't ask me to talk any more about myself, it opens the old wounds so terribly. Tell me of your own life. Is old Miss Prescott living? How is it that you thought of going on the stage?'

But here Susie hangs back and hesitates. She has been but too willing to listen to the recital of Lena's woes, and to sympathise in them, but how can she tell her of herself? How can she divulge the secret she has hitherto watched with so much care? And yet it seems but a sorry friend-

ship that, having heard all, refuses to disclose anything in return.

'Can't you trust me?' cries Lena, sharply, divining the cause of her hesitation; 'I have told you everything. I have placed even my wretched means of subsistence in your hands; for if my story were repeated I should be dismissed from the theatre to-morrow. And yet you are afraid to trust me in return. You think because I have fallen, and been weak enough to confess it, that I can have no feelings of honour left! Oh, what a fool I have been to confide in you!'

'No, no, Lena, you are not a fool, and I am your friend—indeed I am, and will trust you as you have trusted me. I only hesitated because my story too is a sad one, and I have never told it yet to anyone, for fear that my hiding-place may be discovered. Even my father does not know where I am, Lena.'

'I thought you were an orphan, Susie. I did not know you had a father.'

'Neither did I, till some years after we

were separated. My old aunt intended me to inherit all that she possessed, but there was something informal about her will, and her brother claimed everything. So, then, I had to go back to my father—luckily for me, for he is the dearest father in the world—and I found that his name was Joseph Gresham, and he was the manager of a provincial company.'

'So your name is Susie Gresham, instead of Prescott?'

'It *was*,' says Susie, colouring, 'until I married.'

'What! Susie! are *you* married too, such a child as you are?'

'I was eighteen last birthday, Lena. Yes, I am married, and my marriage has turned out almost as unfortunate as yours.'

'Most marriages do, my dear. But let me hear how it came about.'

'My father put me on the stage, and I was very happy there. But at York, about three or four months afterwards, I met my husband (that was only last July), and he married me, and took me away

from the stage and my own people, and I could not be happy with him. So I determined to return to the profession. But my father did not approve of my doing it, and so I took the name of Mary Lester, to prevent his knowing where I am. For a father, however good he may be, cannot judge of a wife's heart, Lena.'

'What made you unhappy with your husband, Susie? Wasn't he good to you? Hadn't you all you wanted?'

'Yes, he was always good, and I had more luxuries than I had ever had before. But money and goodness cannot satisfy a woman, Lena, without love; and he didn't love me best of all. I found that out soon enough. His mind and thoughts are all given to someone else, and I am too proud to own my support to a man who thinks it is sufficient payment for being his wife.'

'I did not think you had such a spirit, Susie,' says Lena languidly; 'and what is your husband's name?'

Susie is silent, and bites her lip.

'What is his name?' repeats Lena sharply.

'Why do you want to know it, Lena? I care for him too much not to wish to behave as fairly by him as I can under the circumstances, and I have considered it a point of honour hitherto to keep his name and my own a secret. I have not mentioned it to a soul in Glasgow.'

'Of course not,' replies Lena; 'one would hardly expect you to make a confidant of the stage-carpenters, or scene-shifters, or of any of those idle, chattering fools in the general dressing-room; but don't forget, though I *am* in rags, that I am a gentlewoman, and as little likely to betray your secret as you would be to tell mine.'

'*You* did not tell me the name of *your* husband,' says Susie, still hesitating.

'But I *will*. Why should I object to tell his name. The whole country rang with the news of his disgrace and mine, and I am not ashamed of my husband, I can tell you, although I am ashamed of

myself for having left him. His name is Philip Luton—Baron Luton of Lutonstowe. Ay! you may stare, but it is true! and the man who took me from him was Cecil Knatchbull, curse him!'

As the fatal import of these words fall on Susie's ears, every morsel of colour forsakes her features, leaving her with stony, staring eyes, and a face as pallid as that of a statue. She cannot move nor speak, she feels as if she cannot breathe. All she can do is to stand opposite to Lena, with horror and repugnance depicted on every lineament of her countenance, and cold despair creeping through her veins like a stream of frozen water. Her companion believes for the moment that she is ill.

'What is the matter?' she exclaims; 'you frighten me. Did you imagine I had married a chimney sweep? What is there so astonishing in the information that I am Lord Luton's wife?'

But here Susie recovers herself sufficiently to answer,—

'It is a lie!' she hisses, through her clenched teeth; 'you are *not* his wife! Lord Luton married *me* last September in Cheltenham. *I* am Lady Luton of Lutonstowe!'

She draws herself up to her full height as she finishes the sentence, and regards her rival with an air at once dignified and indignant. But she is little prepared for the effect of her words. Lena's eyes blaze liquid fire. Into her white face there streams a torrent of blood that dyes it crimson. Her delicate hands are clenched like tiger's claws, and with a scream of fury she dashes from her chair, and buries her talons in Susie's fair throat. The attack is so sudden that the girl has no chance of resisting it.

She feels her rival's nails digging into her tender flesh, her eyes protrude, her power of speech is gone; in another moment perhaps she might have become unconscious, when the hold is as suddenly relaxed, and the wretched Lena sinks in a crushed heap upon the floor, sobbing her heart out at her feet.

'Oh! forgive me; forgive me!' she moans, 'I am mad! I did not know what I was doing. I am always mad when I think of the woman he has made his wife. O Susie! speak to me; say that you won't hate me! I only thought of Philip; I forgot that it was *you*. Oh! why don't you speak? why *don't* you speak? I will kill myself this very night if you do not forgive me.'

Poor Susie is scarcely in a condition to answer. She has been terribly alarmed by the unexpected assault, and every nerve in her body is quivering at the idea that *here* —at her feet—lies the woman for whose sake Lord Luton has so ill requited her love for him. But at last she speaks, in a low, trembling voice, which is true, although it cannot quite conceal her feelings.

'I *do* forgive you, Lena! Please get up. But I have never wronged you. Why should you wish to harm me?'

'It is not *you!* it is not *you!* Can't you understand? I hate and despise myself so much for what I have done, that I

cannot endure the idea of any woman filling the place I threw away! Oh, think of me! Think of what I have come down to; think of the miserable creature I am—diseased in mind and body—and you cannot have the heart to refuse me your pardon.'

'I do not refuse it,' replies Susie softly; 'I forgive you, Lena, from the bottom of my heart. But, now, I think you had better go home. I am rather—rather—upset by this business, and shall require a little time to recover myself. Let us say farewell, until we can both think more calmly of the position in which we stand to one another, and are able to meet without this bitter pain.'

'I understand you,' says Lena sullenly, as she rises to her feet, and re-arranges her crushed bonnet, 'This is only a *ruse* to get rid of me. You do not intend to see me again. You spurn me from you as the world has done.'

'Have I ever told you a falsehood, Lena?' asks Susie sadly. 'I only said what I meant—that we both feel the pre-

dicament in which we are placed too keenly, to be able to speak calmly of it to-night. Let us go to our respective beds. Sleep may do much for us, and prayer may do more. And, believe me, that were you not Lena Anstey I could not say so much. But you must see how discomposed I am! I am shaking all over, and really am not fit to sit up any longer. Good-night.'

'May I see you to-morrow?' demands Lena.

'Will it be any good?' says Susie; 'have you anything more to tell me?'

'Yes! a great deal! we can't go on like this, you know. One or other of us must leave Glasgow, and I had better be the one to go. May I come and speak to you about it to-morrow morning?'

'Yes! if you wish it, though I cannot see what difference it can make to us now. The misfortune is, that we should have loved the same man.'

'And you won't say good-night to me then,' says Lena.

'I *have* wished you good-night,' replies Susie, who for the life of her could not at that moment embrace her rival.

'Ah! I see how it is. That man has parted us!' exclaims Lena wrathfully; 'not content with having led me on to destroy my married happiness, he comes now between me and the purest feeling my life has ever known. Oh! Susie! Susie!'

And, so, weeping and moaning behind her shabby shawl, Lena Anstey walks quickly out of the room, and runs down the stone staircase into the street.

CHAPTER VI.

LENA'S LAST REQUEST.

AS Lena's footsteps die away in the distance, and Susie locks the door after her to prevent any chance of her return, she sinks into a chair, and, passing her hand over her brow, wonders if she has heard and seen aright, or if all that has passed in her room that evening can be a horrid dream. But no! She is wide awake, and on her fair, slender throat are the marks, red and angry, of those ten vicious little fingers that, for one mad moment, thirsted to take her life. Susie's first impulse, on finding herself alone, is to burst into tears;

the next, to fling herself on her knees, and lift up her soul in prayer to Heaven.

'O God,' she cries, 'help me to do what is right and just in this matter!'

She is not thinking of the possibility of undoing what the law has done. She does not hold any sentimental, quasi-religious ideas that it is wrong for a man to divorce his wife, and that two wretched mortals, whom God never joined in wedlock, and who only live to make each other miserable, are bound to be chained together, growing worse with each passing year till death shall come and cut off their last chance of blotting out the past by a more honourable life.

Susie, as she prays that prayer, is thinking only of Lena's love for Lord Luton, and Lord Luton's supposed love for her. If the woman has truly repented of her sin, and is half dying with despair at the thought of her husband's resentment and anger—and the man, on his part, is dreaming of the woman, night and day, and so tender of her memory that he preserves

everything that she has left behind her as though it were sacred—ought they to be kept in ignorance of each other's feelings? Will not the person who is cognisant of their mutual wishes be standing between them and heaven if she does not bring them together again, if only to confer and receive pardon before they die. It can make no difference to herself, Susie thinks, with a quiver of her sweet, sensitive lips.

Philip does not love *her*. He has loved only Lena from the beginning. He will love her no less and no more for seeing her as she is now; and perhaps he will help her to lead a happier and a more respectable life. But as she ponders thus, the tears course each other quickly down the poor child's cheeks.

She has always told herself hitherto that she has no hope, and no intention of ever returning to Lord Luton's protection. But as the fact (well known, but not well realised before) of his first wife being alive, and yearning to become reconciled to him,

forces itself upon her mind, she comprehends for the first time how dear to her the hope has been, that some day Philip may seek her out to allay all her doubts, and take her to his arms again.

But she must never think of that now. With the truth so coarsely thrust before her of Lena's existence, Susie feels as if she had never been Lord Luton's wife. How *can* she be, when this other woman lives, and speaks of him as hers—and mentions his name boldly as the name of her husband? Oh! these laws are cruel—inscrutable! Susie feels as if she should go mad when she thinks of them. She rises from the chair where she has thrown herself, and walks up and down the room rapidly, and wonders why fate should have brought her to Glasgow of all places in the world; and then another phase of argument presents itself to her. Incredulity takes the place of assurance, and she begins to question whether Lena really is what she professes to be, or if she has deceived her, in order to learn her own name and station.

She remembers the ease with which Lena used to romance in their childish days, and trembles with excitement when she thinks she may have fallen into a trap. After all, what proof did Lena adduce of her being Lord Luton's wife? She had the names of people and places at the end of her tongue, but with a scandal that has been made public by the press, that is easy enough. And is it likely that the quondam Lady Luton would sink *quite* so low? Her own family might spurn her, but they would hardly like her to go about the world in abject poverty, and blazon the truth to every one she met. And then Magdalena, the first wife, visited her. She saw her in Scarborough and in London and at Lutonstowe; and she recognised her from her portrait, and she was not a bit like Lena. Excepting—(Susie is too truthful to omit this circumstance, even in an argument with herself)—excepting with respect to her eyes; and those, she must admit, were terribly similar, especially when Lena flew at her throat. Still there is sufficient proof

of her identity missing, to raise serious doubts in Susie's heart, and from having anticipated their next meeting with the utmost repugnance, she becomes almost anxious for it to take place, that she may satisfy her mind upon the subject. She takes no heed of the fear which simultaneously presents itself, that if Lena is found out in an attempt at deception, she will probably take her revenge by making Susie's story patent to the ears of Glasgow. At all risks, she thinks (even that of her father and Philip finding her address), she must know the truth.

So that when the landlady taps at her door the next morning, with the intimation that there is a young person from the theatre waiting to see her, Susie desires she shall be shown up at once. She is very pale and serious, poor child, as she attends this second interview with her rival, but she tries to put every thought out of her mind, except that she is Lena Anstey, the friend and playmate of her childhood.

Lena enters the room, looking still more wretched and wasted by daylight than Susie has seen her before, and mounting the staircase has had such an effect upon her, that for some minutes she can scarcely speak for want of breath. Susie does not advance to meet her, nor offer to take her hand, and Lena is compelled to open the conversation.

'I have been unable to sleep all night,' she says, 'for thinking of the extraordinary revelations we made to each other. *You and I*, Susie—wives to the same man! How little we dreamt of such a catastrophe when we played in the cloisters together at Malisbury.'

'Neither have I slept, Lena,' replies Susie; 'for to me this matter is of much greater importance than it can be to you. You *may have been* Lord Luton's wife, but remember that *I am so*, and my husband may reclaim me any day, and insist upon my returning to my duty. And how should we stand towards each other then?'

'Don't remind me too often that you

are his wife,' mutters Lena, with a return of her natural sullenness; 'or I may forget myself again, as I did last night.'

'No! I don't think you will. I was unprepared for your attack then, or I should have resisted it more easily. Don't let us come to any vulgar squabble on the matter, Lena, or I may have in self-defence to convince you that I am the stronger and the bigger woman of the two. These marks upon my throat should make you too much ashamed to talk of repeating your violence.'

Lena looks at them, and shudders.

'Go on,' she says, quietly; 'say what you have to say to me.'

'I have been thinking very deeply on what you told me last night, Lena, and it appears to me that you did not give any satisfactory proof of your having been Lord Luton's wife. Don't imagine I doubt your word, but I should not be dealing fairly by my husband, to act upon what you say, until I am *sure*.'

'What proofs do you want? I don't

carry the marriage certificate about in my pocket, if that's what you mean. But we were married at St George's, Hanover Square, and if you like to send a shilling to the clerk, you will get a copy of it.'

'I see. I am so ignorant of such things I never thought of that. But the first Lady Luton's name was Magdalena.'

'So is mine. "Magdalena Corinna Anstey." Those are the names you will find in the register. But I was always called "*Lena*," until that flirting fool, Mrs George Lambert, taught Lord Luton to use my full name.'

'Oh, you knew Mrs George, of course!' cries Susie, with sudden remembrance.

'Knew her! I should think I did, and hated her into the bargain. She was at the bottom of half my jealousy of Philip. She made love to him in the most open and barefaced manner, and he was too weak, I suppose, to resist her flattery. Men are idiots when their vanity is tickled. She was always having secret understandings and conversations with him, till I

grew sick of the sight of her dyed hair and rouged cheeks.'

'She is just the same now,' says Susie, with a sigh. 'But it is no use being jealous of Philip, for he declares she is nothing to him. And she always speaks of you, Lena, as though she were your friend.'

'Then she *lies!*' exclaims the other fiercely. 'She is no more my friend than she is yours. Mrs Lambert will *never* be the friend of anyone Lord Luton favours. It was she who poisoned my mind against him, and worked upon my jealousy, until I was beside myself; and it was she who put Cecil Knatchbull in my way, and persuaded him I was enamoured of him, until he dared to tempt me to my ruin. It is true as that I stand before you now. Cecil Knatchbull did not spare me afterwards. He told me the whole story from beginning to end, and made me see what a dupe I had been. Oh, Susie, when I heard Philip had married again, and all chance of being reconciled to him was

shut out for ever, I sat night after night, and day after day, longing—*longing*—only to meet the woman that had usurped my place, and be revenged upon her. But however bitter my feelings may have been against Lord Luton's *wife*, they never reached the point of hatred with which I regard Mrs Lambert. *I* am a bad woman, I know, but *she* is a thousand times worse. The wife who leaves her home is innocent in comparison with the married woman who intrigues to betray her husband and her husband's friend at the same time.'

'I never liked her,' replies Susie; 'I distrusted and was afraid of her from the beginning. But, Lena, when you came into my bedroom at Scarborough, how was it you did not recognise me then?'

Lena's face assumes a puzzled expression.

'*When I came into your bedroom at Scarborough?* What on earth do you mean?'

'You are not going to deny that you have haunted Lord Luton's footsteps or mine!' says Susie, with a look of annoy-

ance. 'Since you have confessed so much, Lena, pray be open with me altogether. You *know* that you came to Scarborough, and to the house in Cavendish Square, and again to Lutonstowe, the very day I left. It was your coming that made me run away, although I did not recognise you for anyone I had seen before. But you were dressed better, and your hair was curling over your face, and—'

'Like *this?*' asks Lena, interrupting her, as she tosses her bonnet on the table, and loosening her hair, lets it fall in a tangled mass of curls over her brow.

'Yes! yes!' exclaims Susie, shrinking back at the likeness that recalls her past pain; 'that is how you looked, Lena, and you wore a white dress, and you were very angry with me—as angry as—as—you were last night.'

'Did you see me *yourself?*' demands Lena, in a tone of awe.

'Of course I did, and I would have spoken to you, had you not run away so quickly from me.'

'Susie! *it was not I!*'

'Oh! Lena! indeed it was! Last night I doubted it. There is such a difference between your appearance as it was then, and now. But since you have let down your hair, I am convinced of the truth. How was it, Lena, that you did not know me? You might have saved us all so much trouble if you had only spoken.'

'*You* may have seen *me*, Susie, but *I* never saw *you*.'

'But you *did*, for you frowned at me, and whispered, "*He is mine!*" and in Cavendish Square you frightened me so much that I fainted on the floor. Surely you must remember that!'

'I repeat that I do not remember, and that I never saw you, Susie. But many people have seen me as you say you have. There is a curse upon my life that causes me, against my will, to haunt those that I hate or love.'

'I do not understand you, Lena,' says Susie, trembling.

'Nor ever will! How can I expect you

to understand what the world itself has not yet fathomed? But it is true, nevertheless. There has been a link between us two from the beginning, Susie. A subtle attraction which we both felt, even as little children, but could not account for. Else, why were we so magnetically drawn together—we—who appeared to have so little in common? And yet—when they tore us asunder, they nearly snapped the cord of my existence.'

'And you came to me, then!' cries Susie, a sudden glow overspreading her delicate features. 'Oh! how it all comes back to my mind! How plain the past seems to appear! You came to me in the garden, Lena, in your pink frock, and Aunt Susan punished me because I said I had seen you, when Miss Whistler declared you had been locked up in the deanery. And I saw you again,' she continues, her hazel eyes beaming with spiritual light, as the reminiscences of her childhood pour back upon her mental vision. 'You came to me a second time, when I

was alone in the parlour, and you disappeared as mysteriously as you did before. Oh, Lena! I remember it all now as plainly as though it had happened yesterday—and yet, you say, you were not there.'

'No more than I was in Scarborough, or London, or Lutonstowe, Susie. I was *thinking* of you, doubtless—longing to be with you on the first occasions, and harbouring feelings of revenge against you on the second. But I did not dream that it was *you*, or my hard heart would have melted within me. Oh! it is hard that we who loved each other so dearly as little children, should be rivals now!'

'We are not rivals!' cries Susie impulsively; 'we *will not be!* We are women, Lena, suffering from the same bitter sense of wrong—friends, who will try to be each other's help and comfort in the future.'

And with this she opens her arms, and Lena rushes into them, and the two girls hold each other close and sob and sob,

until their aching hearts are somewhat lightened. But as Susie becomes calmer she feels Lena fall heavily against her bosom, and looking downwards, finds to her dismay that she has fainted. The poor creature, worn out by illness and the violence of her emotions, has no strength left to bear up against the joy of a reconciliation, and lies motionless in the chair where her friend places her. Susie rings hastily for assistance and remedies, and the landlady who answers her has apparently but a poor opinion of the condition of the patient.

'Lor'! she do look bad!' she exclaims. 'I should say, if asked, as she was took for death myself. I don't like the look of them blue tints about her mouth, Miss Lester. Be she one of the dressers about the theatre? Lor', now! and to think she should be took ill in your rooms. Do you know where she lives, Miss Lester? You had better let me fetch a cab, and send her home as soon as ever she comes

to. She may be going to have an illness, you know.'

'I shall do no such thing,' says Susie, when water, and smelling-salts, and every remedy the house contains has been tried upon poor Lena without success; 'I shall send for a doctor first, and hear what he says. Go and fetch me one at once, please, Mrs Gilchrist.'

'And which will you have, Miss Lester?'

'Anyone—the best you know—only be quick about it!' cries Susie; and in a few minutes a Dr Begbie enters the room, and examines the unconscious woman.

'She is not dead?' inquires Susie fearfully.

'No, Miss Lester—I believe I have the honour of addressing Miss Mary Lester—the poor creature is not dead, but she is in a dangerous syncope. The heart is all wrong, you see, and the lungs,' he continues, after a professional examination with the stethoscope; 'and it is impossible to say how it may turn out. It is most awkward her having been taken

ill in your rooms. I hardly know how to get her to the hospital. There is danger in moving a patient under the circumstances.'

'I will not hear of her going to the hospital,' replies Susie. 'There is my bed in the next room; she can have that.'

'But, my dear young lady, you must consider the probable consequences. What would you do with such a person — a dresser, Mrs Gilchrist tells me, from the theatre—laid up in your apartments, perhaps for weeks? You must try and look at it in that light, and let me make the best arrangements I can for her removal.'

'She can't be put in none of *my* beds,' interposes Mrs Gilchrist sourly; 'and that I make bold to say at the beginning.'

'She will be put in *my* bed,' says Susie determinately,—'in the bed I pay for; let who will say to the contrary.'

'Lor'! Miss Lester, I thought higher of you than *that* comes to!' exclaims the crestfallen landlady.

'You thought I was made of the same stuff as yourself, I suppose, with the heart

to turn a dying woman out into the street, to be jostled to death before she reached the hospital; but you are mistaken. Dr Begbie, if this poor creature is unfit to leave the house, be good enough to place her in my bed.'

'The young lady is quite right, Mrs Gilchrist,' whispers the doctor to the landlady; 'it would be little short of murder to move the patient, at all events for the next few hours.'

Poor Lena, who has been lying flat on the floor all this time, is now lifted, still unconscious, and carried into Susie's bedroom, where the doctor leaves the women to undress her, while he seeks some stronger remedies.

'And what are we to put on her, I should like to know?' demands Mrs Gilchrist, when poor Lena's ragged clothing has been removed, and reveals her attenuated figure.

'One of my nightgowns,' replies Susie promptly.

'Lor'! Miss Lester, you're never a-going—'

'Be good enough to do as I ask you, Mrs Gilchrist, and to hold your tongue,' says Susie; and the landlady, in consequence, returns much offended to her own apartments, where she informs her family that she believes Miss Lester has 'gone clean off her head.'

After some further solicitude on the part of the doctor, Lena's worn-out heart commences once more to beat feebly and irregularly, and he pronounces her for the moment to be out of danger.

'But she can't last long, Miss Lester,' he asserts, as he stands with Susie in the sitting-room; 'and now had you not better reconsider your determination, and let me fetch her away to the hospital.'

'No!' repeats Susie firmly; 'so long as she is ill, she must remain here.'

'But my dear young lady, she will not recover, it is of no use mincing the matter to you—she will die here. Her heart is failing fast. She may have a return of the syncope at any moment.'

Susie has to swallow a sob before she answers,—

'Then I will watch her till she dies. Don't think me very strange, doctor, but I have known this poor lady—woman, I mean — under other circumstances, and I cannot desert her now.'

'I honour your heart and your motives, Miss Lester. But she ought not to be left alone, and you have your duties at the theatre.'

'Please to send me an hospital nurse as soon as possible then, and give her your own directions, doctor.'

'And where will *you* sleep, my dear young lady? You must not neglect your necessary rest.'

'Anywhere! on the sofa or a chair. I am young and healthy—only do your best for my poor friend there.'

'I will do my very best for her, you may depend on that. But I cannot prolong her life a single hour.'

He leaves Susie with this sorry comfort, and she returns to Lena's side.

'Oh, Susie, why am I here?' exclaims the sick woman. 'Have I been ill? What is the matter?'

'You fainted, Lena, and the doctor says you had better not be moved to-day.'

'But I cannot remain here;' looking round her wildly; 'this is your bed. What will you do?'

'I shall nurse you till you are well again, dear,' whispers Susie.

'Oh, no, Susie! not you—not *you!* O my God! this is too much,' cries Lena, bursting into tears.

'Hush! hush, dear! Have we not "kissed and made friends" again, as we used to do when we were children? We must not even remember now that we ever thought hardly of each other. And, after all, Lena, you have not wronged me, neither have I wronged you. Why should we ever have been enemies? You did me no harm by being Philip's wife before I was, nor was it my fault that his second choice fell upon me. And I am not a happy nor triumphant wife, Lena. You have no

cause to be envious of me. Philip loves your little finger better than he does my whole body.'

'No, no! it is impossible!'

'I tell you it is true, and who should know so well as I? He cannot bear to hear your name mentioned, it gives him so much pain, and he hoards each little thing you left behind you, as if it were a sacred relic.'

'What! After all the disgrace and shame that I have brought upon him? Susie, your jealousy must have deceived you.'

'I am not deceived, Lena! A man may feel his dishonour bitterly, and yet be unable to root out the love he bore to the woman who betrayed him. And Philip loves you still! When I told him you were in the house, as I believed you to be, he broke from me like a madman, and rushed into the chamber where I had seen you, crying,—"Magdalena! Magdalena!" as if he thirsted to look upon your face again.'

'He loves me still!' murmurs Lena, with upraised, glowing eyes.

'Ah, yes! Far, *far* more than he has ever cared for me,' replies Susie, with a bitter sigh. 'Why should I deceive you? The only reason I left him was because I found his heart was so entirely fixed on his first wife, that I could but hold a secondary place. Therefore you have no need, as I said before, to envy me, Lena.'

'And you can love him, spite of all?' says the sick woman.

Susie blushes crimson. It is her only answer, but the other interprets it aright. The hospital nurse arrives in the course of the afternoon, and attends to Lena whilst Susie is at the theatre, and sits up with her during the ensuing night. The advent of this person seems to open the patient's eyes to her own danger. She knows a professional nurse would not have been summoned without necessity. The next morning she attacks Dr Begbie boldly on the subject.

'How long have I to live, doctor?'

The medical man commences some as-

severation, after the manner of his kind, but Lena cuts him short.

'I know I am dying! I have been dying for a long time, and I am glad of it. Only, I have some arrangements to make before I can feel easy about it. Will it be days or weeks, first.'

'It *may* be weeks, my dear madam,' begins Dr Begbie slowly.

'But it is more likely to be days?' again interrupts Lena. 'Thank you! that is all I wished to know.'

When the doctor has gone, she sends the nurse away, and calls Susie to her bedside.

'Susie, dear, I shall not be with you many days longer.'

'Oh, Lena, it makes me so unhappy to hear you say so.'

'It is more than it does me to say it, Susie. My life has been such a worry and disappointment to me, and I am so tired of it all, you can't think. Only, I must do one thing first. Promise that you'll help me, Susie.'

'I'll help you by every means in my power, Lena,' replies Susie rashly.

'I *must* see Philip again. Send for him.'

'*You must see Philip again!*'

In all the warfare she has been waging against herself for the last few days, Susie has never dreamt she would be called upon to make such a sacrifice as this. To send for Philip. To bring him to the bedside of her rival—her successful rival in his affections—to watch their reconciliation; to listen to their mutual pardon; to see them at peace with one another, vowing, perhaps, to resume their old relations in the future.

Susie does not stay to consider that for Lord Luton and Magdalena there *can* be no future whilst *she* lives to bar their intercourse. She is too miserably jealous still, and too much taken aback by Lena's proposition to be able to reason calmly. All she fathoms is, that she has been asked to bring together again these two people, whom she loves, and who love each other,

and to hear them mutually confess it, while she stands by, *nothing* to either of them —an outcast—a pretender to the throne which Magdalena should never have abandoned. And at the first blush of it, Nature cries out that it is impossible, and that she cannot do it.

'You must see Philip again,' she repeats, more slowly, and with scared eyes. 'But it is impossible, Lena. He would not come.'

'I thought you said he loved me still.'

'He loves your memory—and—and—you made him very miserable by your desertion. But I do not think he would come here, even if you wrote to him.'

'I cannot write; I am too weak. You must go and fetch him, Susie.

'Oh, no!—no!'

The refusal is wrung from a tortured heart that feels as if it could bear no more. But Magdalena holds her close, fixing her large, mournful eyes upon her face.

'And yet you say you love me, and you

are my friend. And I am dying, Susie—dying fast. My heart beats slower every hour. In another day or two, it will be too late. And you will let me die without his pardon. You are jealous of me even now.'

'No, no, Lena! I am not jealous; but it has come so suddenly upon me. Only give me time to think, and you shall not die without a single consolation that I can procure for you.'

She rushes into another apartment, and throws herself into a chair, clasping her forehead with her hands.

CHAPTER VII.

ALL A MISTAKE.

SHE tries to shut out all consideration of herself, or of her own feelings, and to look at the matter simply from Lena's point of view. Lena is dying. There is no doubt of that. Dr Begbie has said that, at the outside, a week or two must finish her existence. And she wants to ask Philip's forgiveness for the great sin she has sinned against him. She will die in pain and longing, if she does not obtain it; and, perhaps, with curses on her tongue for the false friend who has refused her last request. Susie shudders as she thinks

of it. Some terrible punishment will surely follow her if she neglects to sacrifice her own inclinations in so serious a matter. Perhaps she too will die alone, without a word or look of forgiveness for all the errors with which her life may teem. At all risks she decides that she must do as Lena asks her, and summon Lord Luton to Glasgow. But she cannot shut her eyes to the probable consequences. Philip may misinterpret the motive of her addressing him. He may think she has done it more on her own account than that of his lost wife, and, under the garb of mercy, employed an unworthy means to lure him back to her side. The girl's pride rises in revolt against the idea; but can she put it in the balance against Lena's peace of mind? Or he may order her to return to Lutonstowe, whether she wishes it or not—to recommence a loveless, barren life with him, knowing that all his thoughts are fixed upon the Absent or the Dead, and that she is only a piece of furniture in his house, like a chair or a table, useful

and perhaps ornamental, but not essentially necessary to his happiness. All this is very galling to the girl's mind. She left her home in a burst of romantic passion, and though it would be untrue to assert she has never regretted the hastiness of her decision, she certainly has no wish to re-enter it under the same circumstances. Yet how can she bring Lord Luton to Magdalena's bedside without betraying that she is there also? Can she possibly make the summons sufficiently urgent in a telegram, without letting the public into a secret which he has tried so hard to keep? Or will Philip take any notice of a letter which is supposed to be written by a stranger.

These questions chase each other through Susie's brain, and the oftener they recur, the less she feels able to answer them. But of one thing she is certain. Whatever happens in consequence, Lena's desire must be gratified, even if it be followed by a life-long expiation for herself.

When once she has arrived at this de-

cision, Susie loses no time in putting it into execution. She has heard, in a recent letter from her step-mother, that Lord Luton is again at Lutonstowe, and she telegraphs there, and to his club in London.

'From Mary Lester, Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow.—"Magdalena's here, and dying. Please come at once."'

And then, lest the telegrams should not have sufficient effect, she sits down and writes, in a feigned hand,—

'SIR,—The lady who was your wife is at the above address, dying and alone. She is very anxious to see you again. Pray come as soon as you receive this. The doctor says she cannot last many days, and may die at any moment. I write you this as her friend, and have telegraphed to the same effect.—Yours faithfully,

'MARY LESTER.'

When she has despatched the telegrams and posted the letter, she goes into Lena's room,

looking very careworn and distressed, but with a calm smile.

'I have done as you desired me, dear, she says. 'I have both telegraphed and written to Philip.'

'You have asked him to come to me?' exclaims Lena, with clasped hands.

'I have told him he *must* come. He is sure to be here to-morrow.'

'You are *certain* he will not refuse?'

'Quite certain. If he gets my letter and telegram, he will start at once. Humanly speaking, you may depend upon seeing him before this time to-morrow. He loves you too much still to disregard your last request.'

Lena's eyes shine brightly.

'Oh! Susie! how good you are to me! What a true and unselfish friend! But your kindness will come back on your own head. Philip will not leave Glasgow again without you.'

'Please don't say that, Lena, nor think it! And I want you to promise not to tell him that I am here. I have written in the

name of Mary Lester. He will not ask to see me. He will be too engrossed with you. And you will not mention that you have seen me, will you?'

Lena looks uneasy for a moment, then she brightens up, and says,—

'I will not say a word to him upon the subject.'

'Thank you, dear! I shall get another room for myself, and occupy it whilst he is here. And now it is time for me to go to the theatre, and you must try and sleep again. Be as happy as you can, dear Lena, and rely upon it that Philip will soon be with you.'

'I *am* happy, Susie—happy to think that it will so soon be over, and that I am going without pain. I am really quite comfortable. All I feel is a little sinking every now and then, as if I were going to swoon. But nurse bathes my forehead with *eau-de-cologne*, and it soon passes off. And you are quite sure that Philip will forgive me?'

'Quite—*quite*—sure! He is too noble and generous not to forgive as he hopes

to be forgiven. He will only remember how dear you were to him.'

'You make me so happy! I shall sleep like a child to-night, and to-morrow—to-morrow—I shall see him, and perhaps I may die in his arms. Oh! God has been too good! too merciful to me! When I have once seen Philip again, I shall have nothing left to wish for—nothing—*nothing*.'

She closes her large dark eyes slowly as the last word leaves her lips, and the nurse rises, and comes forward, whispering to Susie,—

'You'd better leave her now, miss. She's off to sleep again, poor dear. She hasn't the strength to keep her eyes open long, but, thank God! she's going as peacefully as she possibly could go.'

Susie stoops down and kisses the pale lips of her friend before she leaves the room. She has no feeling but kindness left for Lena now, and she dreads lest Lord Luton should be absent from home and miss his telegrams and letter, or disregard their summons till too late.

This idea makes her graver than usual when she walks into her dressing-room at the theatre, where Miss Hunter is ready to receive her, and ply her with questions respecting the wonderful piece of news that is being talked of through the Royal Thistledown. It is impossible to keep a secret from a theatrical company, and each member of it is already perfectly well aware that poor Abby, the dresser, was taken ill at Miss Lester's lodgings the day before, and has been unable to be moved since. Susie is quite prepared for the volley of questions that assails her on every side as soon as she has crossed the threshold of the theatre, but she is determined to let them know as little in return as possible.

All they can extract from her is, that Abby *is* in her rooms, and very ill—too ill to be allowed to see anybody—and that it is quite uncertain when she will be able to resume her duties. But Miss Hunter will not be put off with generalities.

'My dear girl,' she exclaims, 'is it

really true you have that wretched creature in your lodgings? What did she go for? how was she taken ill? and why didn't you send her home at once?'

'She came to speak to me on some private business, Miss Hunter, and she fainted whilst we were talking together—she is suffering from heart disease—and the doctor would not sanction her removal. That is all! There is nothing to make a fuss about, but people must find something of which to talk.'

'But Harris heard that you had an hospital nurse for her, my dear. Is that true?'

'Yes; Dr Begbie sent one to us. *I* couldn't sit up at night, you know, and Mrs Gilchrist would not take the trouble.'

'I should think not! But who's to pay for it all, Mary? That's the question. You'll have a funeral on your hands if you don't take care.'

'Let us hope that she will get well instead. But in any case, I could not have acted differently. It would have

been sheer murder to send her jolting to the hospital.'

'You *are* unfortunate,' says Miss Hunter; 'however, don't fret about it, dear. If the worst comes to the worst, Haleybury and the company won't let *you* bear the expense. We must have a subscription, and you may put me down for a couple of pounds at the head of it.'

'Thank you, Miss Hunter,' replies Susie quietly.

But it jars on her, nevertheless, to hear poor Lena's funeral expenses discussed beforehand, and she remains so grave and serious during the evening that her companions forbear from questioning her further. Meanwhile, as the lights flash and dance in the theatre, and the orchestral instruments send forth their stirring strains, and the whole building is alive like a hive of busy bees, Lena awakes from her deathlike slumber in the darkened room in Sauchiehall Street, and calls feebly to her attendant. She cannot raise her voice above a whisper now,

poor creature, for she is dying faster than she is aware of, and her breath is failing with each passing moment. The nurse has to bend her ear close to the patient's mouth to catch her words.

'Give me—paper—and a pencil—'

'Paper and pencil,' repeats the nurse; but what for, my poor dear? You can't write.'

'I think—I could,' gasps Lena. 'I must try.'

So the woman, only anxious to soothe her last moments, goes in search of a piece of paper and a pencil, in Susie's sitting-room, and returns with them in her hand. She has to hold Lena up in her arms, whilst she makes a few trembling marks upon the paper, and when she motions to be laid down, she is so exhausted that the nurse thinks for the moment that she has gone. But when she has bathed her face with cold water, and put a few drops of brandy between her leaden-coloured lips, she is able to speak again.

'Nurse!' she says, faintly, as her shak-

ing fingers attempt to fold the paper like a note, 'take this—and keep it. And when—the gentleman comes—give it to him—alone—*alone!*'

'Of course I will, my dear,' replies the nurse, as she pockets the paper. 'And now you must rest again. You're too weak to be writing like this.'

Lena closes her eyes obediently, with a happy smile.

'Give it him,' she murmurs, '*alone.* And tell *her*—dear Susie—that I am so happy—so very, *very*—happy.' And so she goes to sleep.

But when Susie returns from the theatre at eleven o'clock, and softly turns the handle of her door, so as to make no noise, she is met by Dr Begbie on the other side.

'It is all over, my dear Miss Lester,' he says, gravely. 'The poor young creature is gone.'

'*Gone!* Not *dead!*' cries Susie, rushing into the next apartment, and falling on her knees beside the bed. 'Oh! my poor, poor

Lena—and without seeing *him!* How could God have the heart to refuse your prayer!'

'Lor'! my dear lady!' exclaims the nurse, 'you've no call to regret it! Why, she went off in her sleep as peaceful as a lamb! She didn't as much as move an eyelid—that *I'll* swear to—and her last words was, "Tell her" (that was you, miss) "I am so happy—so very, *very* happy!" It's the beautifullest death I've seen for a long day. No one could wish for a beautifuller, and I'm sure she's a deal better off than she was here, with a heart that was no more good to her than a wisp of straw!'

Susie is quite sensible enough to catch the wisdom of the nurse's argument, and after a few passionate tears, given more to the presence of death than the loss of Lena, she rises from her knees and addresses the doctor.

'What am I to do, doctor? I did not think it would be so soon, and she was expecting friends to come from London and see her to-morrow.'

'Friends! ay, ay, that's very bad! I didn't think the poor thing had any friends,' says Dr Begbie.

'A friend, at least—a gentleman!' replies Susie, blushing.

'Ah! the poor dear spoke of him to me this evening. Well, well! he'll never see her alive again, that's certain,' says the nurse, with a professional sigh.

'And I don't wish to meet him. He is nothing to me,' continues Susie, talking very fast in her desire to appear indifferent; 'so I have taken rooms near the theatre, where I shall go till the funeral is over. And, doctor, if nurse can stay here till then, and receive the gentleman if he comes, it will be all right, won't it? And if he should wish to speak to you, she may send for you — may she not? And—and—you won't mention my name to him, if you can help it,' she goes on, in a strangely agitated voice, 'because I dislike strangers—and—'

'You are one of those rarities, my dear young lady,' replies Dr Begbie, 'who do

good by stealth and blush to find it fame. Very well! I will be discreet; but were I the gentleman you allude to, I should not leave Glasgow till I had found you.'

'He will not want to find me,' says Susie tremulously, as she stoops to press a farewell kiss on the dead forehead of her friend, and with a hurried good-night to the nurse and doctor, goes home to the apartments she has engaged for herself.

Lord Luton receives the telegram which is sent to Lutonstowe, and, shocked and surprised by its contents, starts by the night mail to Glasgow. But as the recital has anticipated, he arrives too late. The professional nurse is the only living creature to receive him in Sauchiehall Street, and to give him an account of the last moments of the departed. She does not guess the relationship which has existed between them, as she watches the handsome young man standing gravely by the corpse, with a look of the profoundest compassion in his eyes. She supposes that the dead woman may have been a

protégée—or a poor connection of his; but that she should have been his wife, is the last idea that enters her imagination. She has examined the paper entrusted to her care for him again and again, without making head or tail of it, and now produces it, only with the hope of getting an extra guerdon for exceeding her duty.

'The poor dear creature as lies there, sir,' she commences, for Lord Luton has been careful not to give his name to the inquisitive landlady at the door, 'she died in my arms, a-whispering how happy she was, and how grateful for all I had been and done for her; for she wanted for nothing, sir,—you may make your mind easy on that score. Everything as money could procure, and all the care and attention as could be given, was hers, for I've passed through the hospital at Edinburgh, and got my certificates to show, and—'

'Yes! yes—' interposes Lord Luton impatiently; 'but who is Miss Mary Lester, who telegraphed to me yesterday? Do

these rooms belong to her? Where is she? Cannot I speak to her?'

The nurse has been drilled by the doctor to say as little of Miss Lester as possible, so all the answer that Philip gets is,—

'These *are* Miss Lester's rooms, sir, when she is in town, but she's gone away to stay with friends, and left them to us, and this poor dear! I suppose she thought as you would make your own arrangements for the funeral, sir.'

'Yes! yes! that will be my business, of course. But I should like to see the doctor who attended my poor—friend here! What is his name?'

'Dr Begbie, sir! One of the cleverest gentlemen in Glasgow. The landlady can send round for him.'

'Go and tell her to do so, please.' And the nurse disappears, leaving Philip standing by the remains of Magdalena.

What does he feel as he does so? What emotions does the sight of her pallid corpse awake in his bosom? Only two. The first, deep compassion that a life that

promised so fairly, should have ended in such gloom. The second, intense relief, to think that she is gone, and can never disgrace him more.

If Susie could but read her husband's heart as he stands beside that bedside, she would recognise how little need she has ever had to look upon Magdalena as a rival! As the nurse re-enters the room on tiptoe, she sidles up to him, and begins mysteriously,—

'There is a little matter, sir, I would like to speak to you upon, before the doctor comes in the way—something as is just between you and me and the poor dear as is lying there. An hour or two before she died, she made me lift her up, and give her paper and pencil, and she wrote some words that was to be for you alone. She said several times, as well as she could speak, "Give it to the gentleman, *alone*." So here it is, sir, as I think it my duty to give it you, though perhaps the doctor might say as I should have left it in *his* hands.'

She produces the paper, much soiled from lying in her pocket all night, and Philip, taking it from her, reads the following words,—

'*Susie—Lester—take home.*' He starts violently, and the colour mantles on his cheek.

'*Who* gave you this, do you say?'

'Why—bless you, sir! the poor dead creature as lies there! who else would, to be sure?' cries the nurse, offended at her narration having been so negligently attended to.

But at that moment Dr Begbie enters the room, and the paper is thrust unceremoniously into Lord Luton's breast-pocket. The doctor is of course full of condolence on the melancholy event, but Lord Luton is in no mood to let his real feelings on the subject be discovered.

'I have the pleasure to address—' commences Dr Begbie.

'Captain Philip,' replies Luton, taking his old alias, 'this—*this*—' (waving his hand towards the bed) 'was a distant con-

nection of mine, doctor, though I have lost sight of her for some years, and I should wish everything that is necessary to be done carried out, and without stint. Will you take charge of the funeral for me? I shall remain in Glasgow until it is over. Your own account, and that of the nurse, I will defray as soon as I receive them; and I must thank you both for the attention you have shown this poor lady. Her end seems to have been very sudden.'

Here Dr Begbie enters into a professional explanation of the nature of Magdalena's disease, and the reason of its termination; and in the course of it he is obliged, more than once, to mention Miss Lester's name.

'And this Miss Lester, who has been so charitable to my poor friend,' says Luton, with a fast-beating heart, 'where is she to be found, doctor? I cannot leave Glasgow without thanking her for her goodness.'

'She has gone away. I don't know where she is,' replies the doctor bluntly.

'But *what* is she? A single lady living alone! Is she attached to the theatre?'

cries Philip, with a sudden inspiration; and the nurse has blurted out,—

'Lor'! yes, sir,' before Dr Begbie has time to stop her.

'Thanks! that is all I want to know,' he answers, turning away, but not before he has slipped a sovereign into the curtseying nurse's hand.

He knows what the paper means now. Susie is acting in Glasgow, under the name of Mary Lester, and has thought to elude his search for her under a paltry *alias*. And she has actually received and befriended the unfortunate Magdalena, knowing her to be his dishonoured wife! and of whom she was so jealous that she forsook her home, rather than go shares with her in his affections.

Noble — generous — little soul! Lord Luton's heart throbs like a steam-engine, as he thinks that he has found his sweet, innocent girl! — his simple, pure-hearted wife again! He leaves the rooms with the buoyant step of youth and gladness. Alas! for poor, expectant Magdalena!

He does not turn another glance upon the wasted figure on the bed. It reminds him too painfully of what has been. He does not press one kiss upon her clay-cold brow. Too many lips have set their seal upon it in her lifetime for him to care to keep the memory of a last caress. And as soon as he is sure that Mary Lester and his lost wife are one and the same person, he is only anxious to be gone. As his footfall dies upon the staircase, the nurse says, grimly,—

'Well! he's a gentleman, doctor, and a free-handed one into the bargain, but as for the comfort he'd have been to the poor dead creature there, why it was just as well she died before he came. That's my opinion?'

And the doctor answers that he sees nothing strange in the gentleman's conduct—that the dead woman was evidently a very poor connection of his, if one at all, and that he thinks Captain Philip is behaving very handsomely in ordering her a substantial funeral. 'She's got to thank him for not being buried at the expense

of the parish,' he says, as he also takes his way downstairs.

Meanwhile, Lord Luton hastens to the theatre, and reading the names upon the playbill, determines on what action he shall take in the matter.

Susie is miserably anxious the whole evening. The nurse has visited her at her lodgings during the afternoon, and given her a graphic description of her interview with Captain Philip, taking care in the course of it to animadvert rather resentfully on what she considers his callous behaviour towards the corpse.

'He never so much as touched her, nor shed a tear,' says the nurse in conclusion; 'so I don't think he has much feeling, miss. All he seemed to care about, was to find out your address, so that he might thank you for your kindness in taking her in. And I shouldn't wonder if he made you a handsome present, miss, for he seems to have plenty of money.'

'Oh! you didn't tell him where I live, I hope?' cries Susie, in a fright.

'No! I didn't, miss, but I'd bet he'll find it out, for I never saw a more determined eye in a gentleman, for all it's so soft.'

'I don't want his presents, and I don't want to see him,' replies Susie, half crying, but she feels all the while that Philip has guessed her secret, and will not rest until they have met again, and come to an explanation. She is so nervous she can hardly act that night, and Miss Hunter is annoyed with her for the first time, and declares she is enough to ruin the piece.

'*Who* are you looking for?' she asks, sharply, as they come off the stage; 'your eyes are all over the house to-night, Mary, and *that* is a fault from which I really believed you to be exempt.'

'I don't know what's the matter with me; I feel quite stupid and ill,' replies Susie apologetically.

'It's that woman dying in your house that has done it. If you *will* be so philanthropic, you must take the consequences

But please try and forget her whilst you are on the stage, or you will drive me crazy.'

'I will try indeed,' says Susie humbly.

But she is very thankful when her part is over, and she is no longer exposed to the gaze of so many eyes, amongst which she feels sure are those she loves so well, and dreads to meet so much. As soon as ever she is at liberty, she hurries homewards, unconscious that her steps are being tracked. But she has hardly closed the hall-door behind her when a double knock sounds upon it.

'One of the girls, who wants to speak to me,' thinks Susie, as she turns and opens it herself. But it is not a girl who stands upon the threshold. It is a man! Her heart dies within her.

'Is Miss Lester at home? Can I see her?' asks Lord Luton's musical voice.

'Oh, Philip!' is all she can say in answer.

She knows that it is useless to attempt any further disguise. He has found her,

and she belongs to him. She will have to shape her future life according to his wishes. 'Will you come in?' she says, in a subdued voice, as she leads the way into her little parlour, and turns up the gas.

Lord Luton follows her without another word. He has been watching her the whole evening from a private box, and he is burning to take her in his arms, and pour out the wealth of his love into her bosom. But she has left him of her own accord. She must return to him in the same manner. So he sits down, and rests his head upon his hand, and regards her fixedly in the face, whilst she stands before him, blushing and nervous as a detected schoolgirl.

'Well, Lady Luton?' he commences presently.

'Why have you followed me home? What do you want to say to me?' cries Susie, in a faltering voice.

'I followed you, because I could not have spoken to you else, and what I wish to say is, to thank you for your kindness

to poor Magdalena—a double kindness since you knew she had been my wife.'

'I did not know it at first,' replies the girl, as though she were afraid he would be too ready to believe she had done it for his sake.

'But when she was taken ill—'

'Yes! I knew it then—'

'And yet you would not allow her to be taken to the hospital.'

'I *could* not. It would have made her worse. Besides which, she was my friend in days gone by (long before I met you), although I did not know it till I saw her again. And—and—you loved her! I know that but too well! It was not much for me to do after all that had gone before!'

'If you will not accept my thanks now, then, let us leave them to a future opportunity. But you owe me an explanation, Susie. Why did you leave my house?'

'You know—you *must* know—you are only saying it to torture me!' cries the girl passionately. 'It was because I felt that

I was *nothing* to you. That all your thoughts were engrossed by her memory. The very things which she had touched were sacred in your sight. You could not bear the mention of her name, and yet you murmured it in your sleep, and brooded on it half the day! And I told you before you married me that I *could* not, and I *would* not, take the second place; and neither will I. I would rather die.'

'And I told you at the same time, you unreasonable child, that you held the first place in my heart, and would do so evermore. But as you evidently have no faith in my protestations as a lover, let me speak to you as a friend. May I?'

'If you will promise not to take me back to Lutonstowe. I am happy here —at least, pretty happy. Let me remain so.'

'I promise you on my honour as a gentleman, that I will persuade you to do nothing against your own will. Will that content you?'

'Yes,' replies Susie, almost inaudibly.

'Well then, don't go on standing. You make me feel uncomfortable. Sit down, and let us talk reasonably. In the first place then, Susie, you have made a very great mistake in this matter. I loved Magdalena when I married her, I don't deny that; but the violence of her temper and her jealousy soon wore out my affection, and the way in which she dragged my name through the dirt, killed it altogether. Do you suppose I *could* care for a woman who made love to another man under my very eyes, and eloped with him in order to satisfy a mean feeling of revenge against me? No, no! don't think so little of me as that. The gloom I was still suffering from when we met, was caused by her conduct, but not from misery at her loss. I kept the articles she had touched locked up, lest they should defile a purer hand than hers, and I could not bear the mention of her name because it revived the hatred I was trying to overcome. Even now, Susie, as I stood by her dead body, it took all the

force of will that I possess to enable me to say that I forgave her. God has seen fit to take her, and I trust He may have forgiven her, therefore I must do my best to do so too. But if you will only believe me, Susie, the knowledge of her death is the greatest relief I have experienced since we parted.'

'She was very anxious to see you again, and to ask your pardon,' replies Susie; 'and I thought it my duty to send for you. Besides, Mrs Lambert always told me that you *worshipped* poor Lena, and so did Miss Gennett.'

'Mrs George and Miss Gennett,' repeats Luton, with a curled lip; 'they are trustworthy chroniclers truly. Susie! I have heard more of this than you think of. Do you remember one day, when you were very unhappy, meeting with two ladies in Luton woods?'

'Oh, yes! and the old lady said she knew you.'

'She knows me very well; she is my mother.'

'*Your mother!*' cries Susie, turning scarlet as she recalls the interview.

'Just so, and she repeated the confidence you placed in her to me. You needn't blush so, Susie! My mother is your friend, as well as mine, and opened my eyes to the folly of which I had been guilty.'

'In marrying me?' asks Susie plaintively.

'No! my darling! not in marrying you, but in leaving such a child as you are to the society of women like Mrs George and the Gennetts. They poisoned your mind against me, and you were too simple to see through their machinations.'

'I know I am simple and foolish,' replies Susie, with tears in her voice; 'I am very ignorant, also, and know nothing of the world. I was afraid of all that before I married you, Philip. I knew I was not fit to be Lady Luton, and you see that I was right. I have done nothing but wrong all through.'

'And *I* knew that you were simple, and

what *you* call foolish; and that is the very reason I loved you, Susie—the very reason that I longed to pluck you like a fair, sweet flower to wear for ever in my bosom. But, perhaps, I was ill-advised to induce you to leave the profession for which you evidently are so well adapted. There is no doubt that a High Society life is eminently dull, beside a Bohemian one. But I have made my dear old mother very unhappy by my Bohemianism, and I have promised her to give it up; so that my life will be even less lively in the future than before. I want to settle down at Lutonstowe, Susie, and try and become a model landlord, and have only such friends to visit me as my mother and sisters can associate with. And Mrs George is the first one scratched off the list. But I will not persuade you to return there unless you wish it. If you are happier in your professional life, stick to it, my dearest, and leave me to get on as best I can without you. I will not make you miserable a second time. Only—child—don't hide

yourself from me, as though I were your enemy. Let me know where you are, and what you are doing—and then if you are happy, I will try and be so too. Do you understand me?'

'Yes,' says Susie, in a low voice.

'Let me know your decision, then. I would rather hear it to-night, than be kept in suspense. Is it to be Lutonstowe or the stage? Make a free choice, and do not be afraid of hurting me by your decision. I am prepared for the worst. I don't think I'm fated to be a happy married man. Everything goes against me. But that is no reason that we should both be miserable. What do you say?'

But she is silent, trying hard to speak without tears, wondering in what words to tell him how she loves him—tampering, in fact, with her life's happiness, as women are apt to do—until Lord Luton becomes impatient.

'Very good,' he says, quickly rising, and making for the door; 'I read your decision in your silence. Don't take the

trouble to speak, Susie. Stick to your stage life, and leave me to my solitude. Good-bye—'

But she is after him before he can turn the handle of the door.

'Philip! Philip! my darling! my husband! It has been all a mistake—a wretched, miserable mistake! I love you—love you—*love* you! Oh, take me home, or I shall die!'

He folds his arms about her, and bears her into the sitting-room again, and covers her with kisses.

'My darling girl! My warm-hearted wife!' he cries, 'there is not a nature (on or off the stage) more noble and generous than yours. Come back, and be the light of Lutonstowe, Susie. My mother is waiting to receive you as her own child. My sisters have prepared a dozen little offerings for your acceptance. They are ready to love you before knowing you, and when they hear of the noble sacrifice you made for my sake, they will honour as well as love you. And *I*—oh, child! never

dream again but that I am your lover and your slave. I have hardly slept, eaten, nor drank since I lost sight of your sweet face.'

. . . . . .

And so it ends, like most of this world's romances, in a very matter-of-fact way.

They sit together half through the night, exchanging confidences and comparing notes, and Susie learns for the first time how much she is indebted to poor Magdalena for this happy reunion.

'It was she who separated us,' exclaims Philip; 'but it was she who brought us together again, and I can feel now that I can say from my heart she is forgiven!'

He remains in Glasgow until his wife is at liberty to accompany him home, and Susie's pleasure at seeing Lutonstowe again, and being welcomed as one of the family at High Beech, is doubled by the discovery that her dear father and his wife are not among the prohibited guests which the Dowager Lady Luton has said she cannot receive. And, indeed, a few months later, the

worthy couple spend their Christmas at Lutonstowe, and are treated with as much respect and honour as if they had been the highest in the land.

Joe Gresham cannot get over the delight of seeing his lovely daughter established in her own home, and is continually informing Lord Luton that he never remembers to have seen Susie look so beautiful, nor so happy, nor so well before.

And though Mrs Gresham 'lays the cards' again for her step-daughter, and insists upon seeing 'a boy' in them, whichever way they may be shuffled, Lady Luton only blushes scarlet, and utterly denies all knowledge of whether that prophecy will ever be fulfilled.

THE END.

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